

PRIME MINISTER TO
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T.G.
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Minutes of a Meeting of the Northern Ireland Committee

Thursday 1st April 1982 at 4.15 p.m.

Present: Sir John Biggs-Davison (Chairman), Mr Benyon, Mr Stanbrook, Mr Brown, Dr Mawhinney, Mr Amery, Mr Farr, Mr McNair-Wilson, Mr Porter, Mr Goodlad, Mr Silvester, Mr Arnold, Mr Body, Mr Murphy, Mr Gow, Mr Browne and Sir Philip Goodhart.

The Government's Initiative

The Chairman invited members to put their views. The following points were made:

Mr Murphy said he was 'very concerned'. Ministers at the Northern Ireland Office would find it much more difficult to do their work when confronted by a hostile talking shop. The weighted majority required before power was given to the Assembly was 'undemocratic'. In addition to causing these immense problems, the initiative would also make life more awkward and unpleasant for the Ulster Unionists.

Mr Amery described the plans as 'totally unacceptable' and 'politically and constitutionally damaging'. Northern Ireland politicians should make their careers at Westminster. Instead of pursuing devolution, the Secretary of State should concentrate on winning over the Ulster Unionists, whose support could be decisive after the next election.

Mr Farr took serious exception to the Government's decision not to hold a separate debate on the white paper. As regards devolution, he felt that any attempt to resurrect it now would be seen as a sign of weakness (since the road had already been trodden so many times). The result would be encouragement for the men of violence.

Mr Porter said the initiative was 'doomed to failure'. It had been brought forward with indecent haste, taking no account of the party's reservations. He feared that many would support any proposals in the belief that they might bring peace. As for himself, he served notice of his intention to vote against the initiative.

Sir John Biggs-Davison felt that the initiative would be passed because of the inertia in the party. He expressed particular dislike of the habit of identifying religious groups with particular political positions.

Sir Philip Goodhart said that initiatives led not to political

progress, but to political uncertainty. A way ahead could be found by associating more people in Northern Ireland with executive responsibility. Such a process should be developed slowly. As regards devolution, he expressed great concern about the constitutional position which would arise if no provision was to be made for a referendum. A principle had been established as a result of the referendums in Scotland and Wales. It would be folly to depart from that principle.

Mr Browne deplored the Government's haste and the lack of debate. He was also very worried about the situation after the next election, when the Ulster Unionists might play a crucial role.

Mr McNair-Wilson asked whether enough thought had been given to the new concept of rolling devolution, and the implications of the initiative for Scotland and Wales. He suggested that Mr Pym might be asked to discuss the wider ramifications. Furthermore 'under this bill Northern Ireland passes from being under-governed to being over-governed'.

Mr Body felt that Conservatives should listen to those Ulster Unionists who used to be friends, and whose friendship might be needed again in the future.

Mr Stanbrook said he would support plans designed to create a Regional Council, but he could not support the abhorrent notion of devolution.

Mr Brown expressed some misgivings because the risk of failure was so considerable: that failure might coincide with a general election.

Mr Arnold reminded members that all Northern Ireland parties wanted devolution. This initiative should at least ensure that they all participated in elections, and it was therefore worth undertaking.

(Since I had to leave before the meeting ended, these notes are unfortunately incomplete)