

Minutes of a Meeting of the Northern Ireland Committee

Thursday, 24th May, 1984 at 4.15 pm.

Present: Sir John Biggs-Davison (Chairman), Mr. Stanbrook, Mr. Brown, Mr. Bellingham, Mr. Neubert, Mr. Bottomley, Mr. Morrison, Mr. Rathbone, Mr. Farr, Mr. Budgen, Mr. Gardiner, Mr. Hayes, Mr. Needham, Mr. Wolfson, Mr. Arnold, Mr. MacKay, Mr. Silvester, Mr. Murphy, Mr. Heathcoat-Amory, Mr. Temple-Morris, Mr. Holt, Mr. Alison and the Duke of Hamilton

Northern Ireland Ministers: Mr. Prior, Mr. Butler, Mr. Scott and Mr. Patten.

Report from, and Questions to, the Secretary of State

Personal Position Mr. Prior made it clear that his recent disclosures were not part of some devious plan, designed to bring him a senior position in a future Cabinet. Nor had he been trying to distance himself from Northern Ireland policy.

The Government's Overall Record The Secretary of State referred to the great improvements in housing and industry which have occurred under this Government. He summed up its policy as "absolutely honourable": but security inevitably overshadowed everything else. Over the years security had improved enormously: but there was much more that needed to be done. To that end, a very thorough review of tactics had been carried out.

Politics Even in its present diluted form, the Assembly was having an effect on government in Northern Ireland. There were some other grounds for a little optimism: the Ulster Unionists had announced their intention of returning to the Assembly and had produced a major policy document which Mr. Prior described as a "considerable step forward"; it was worth taking seriously. But it was impossible not to be very apprehensive about the future: there was a real risk that by the time of the local government elections next year, Sinn Fein would have a majority amongst the minority community. It was much more effective than the SDLP in attracting support amongst the young; and it was aided in that task by rising unemployment (which could reach 25% if violence continued to deter fresh investment).

The Secretary of State made it clear that in his view the risks that would arise if no political moves were undertaken would be greater than the risks of trying to take some steps forward.

The Forum Report Mr. Prior said that the weakness of the Forum Report lay in the fact that it did not deal with Ireland's immediate problems: instead it concentrated entirely on long-term constitutional change. But it was couched in conciliatory language and contained no demand for immediate withdrawal by Britain. While the 3 options in the Report could not be accepted, he believed the document should be taken seriously, and that the Government should seek to respond to it in a way that would help nationalists in Northern

Ireland feel that they can take part in the province's political life. In that connection, the Unionist document clearly had something to offer, for it recognised the Irish dimension and the need to safeguard the position of the minority in new institutions. It would be well worth considering the case for a top tier of local government with blocking mechanisms and a Bill of Rights. But such a package of measures would not be sufficient to attract the SDLP. Therefore consideration should be given to providing a greater degree of devolution and a rather larger Irish dimension than the Unionists had suggested.

The Timescale Despite the inevitable pressures of the summer marching season in Northern Ireland, Mr. Prior felt that action by the Government should not be delayed too long since the momentum which exists at the moment could be lost. Tensions within the community had to some extent subsided, and there was now a greater degree of stability in society than for some time. Furthermore, the fact that his own term of office was coming to an end might make it easier for him than for others to make the politicians in the province face up to reality.

Questions were put to the Secretary of State by a number of members. He agreed with Mr. MacKay that a very serious situation would arise if Sinn Feinn overtook the SDLP: but since there were limits to the assistance which the Government could give, it should try to help itself by acting as a serious political party. Mr. Prior assured Mr. Budgen that he saw no reason why the Assembly should not develop in a way that was different from the course envisaged in the 1982 Act; but he made it clear to Mr. Stanbrook that integration was a non-starter and explained to Mr. Farr that a firm commitment to the Union on the part of the Government would not by itself allay the fears of the Unionists. In reply to Mr. Gardiner, he went into further detail about the steps that might be taken to reach agreement with the SDLP. Agriculture and industrial development might, for instance, be devolved to the Assembly; and attention could be given to those issues which could not be tackled on an East-West basis. Mr. Prior went on to point out to Mr. Heathco -Amory that it was necessary to try to combine an Irish dimension with internal change in Northern Ireland itself, rather than to seek progress in just one of these two areas. In reply to Mr. Murphy, he repeated his earlier comments that local government reform on its own would not work.

Mr. Prior made some further references to his personal position, and finally, in answer to a question from Mr. Arnold, explained that the SDLP had not emerged from the Forum in a stronger position and that John Hume would be fortunate to be able to hold it together.

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