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ANGLO-IRISH NEGOTIATIONS: REACTIONS OF PARTY LEADERS

I have now completed the confidential soundings of the party leaders in Northern Ireland on the proposed Anglo-Irish agreement which I was asked by OD(I) to undertake.

2. Mr Hume, as we expected, has been kept informed in general terms of the progress of the negotiations. Like the Dublin Government, his view is that an agreement of the sort being considered, which would not give the Republic a direct share in authority in the North, would have to be accompanied by a series of "confidence building measures" in the law and order field, including radical changes in the UDR and RUC. He believes that the nationalist community need clear signs of a change of policy and attitude in security matters, and that this requires more than cosmetic and gradualist changes. Given a satisfactory agreement, he did not close the door on some form of devolved government, although he doubts whether the Unionists will ever agree genuinely to share power, particularly in the light of their intemperate reaction to the Sinn Fein successes in the recent local elections. His most interesting suggestion was that if we reached agreement it should be presented in a low key manner to public opinion in both North and South as a modest and sensible achievement.

3. I think this is as much as we can expect from him. Even if there is an Anglo-Irish agreement, the SDLP will hardly sign up for a scheme of devolution until they know what Unionist attitudes are going to be, and the signs here are not encouraging at the moment. As regards the agreement itself, Hume's attitude to the security forces is in line with the public statements of the SDLP. Dublin have made it very clear that for internal political reasons they could not sign an agreement unless it was fully supported by

SECRET

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the SDLP. It remains to be seen whether the latter will be satisfied by what we can offer and how much pressure Dublin can put on them.

4. Dr Paisley, predictably, totally rejected the Anglo-Irish initiative. He would not accept my assurances that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland within the UK would be unchanged because he believes that the long-term objective of any government in Dublin is the achievement of Irish unity and that the purpose of signing an agreement of the sort currently proposed is simply to get a foot in the door. My emphasis on the value of improved security co-operation met with the response that we ought to be able to count on co-operation against terrorism without having to pay a price for it and in this case the price of the eventual absorption of Northern Ireland into the Republic was too high. Secret negotiations were generating suspicion of a sell-out among the majority and this was creating instability, which in turn would lead to a Protestant backlash and to people taking the law into their own hands. Serious disorder could be triggered off by this summer's marching season if the RUC tried to interfere with traditional Orange processions. He also made it clear that in his view the Protestant majority would refuse to recognise joint courts or separate unarmed community police forces.

5. Mr Molyneaux spoke on similar lines but in much more moderate terms. He too is worried by reports of the negotiations and the unsettling effect that this is having, coming on top of a number of nasty security incidents and the arrival of Sinn Fein councillors in local government. But he is disposed to accept the present Government's assurance that it is not selling out to Dublin, although he is apprehensive about what might happen under a different government.

6. Mr Cushnahan was generally supportive of an approach on seeking to negotiate consultative machinery with the Irish within the parameters set out at the Chequers summit. His impression

SECRET



PERSONAL

was that the level of concern in the Province about the Anglo-Irish negotiations was rather less than unionist politicians were seeking to suggest. However he was critical of the Irish Government for raising expectations over the likely outcome of the talks.

7. The Unionist reactions were no more than was to be expected. Dr Paisley was vehement in his denunciation of the negotiations; but the apocalyptic vision and the rhetoric of betrayal and backlash are his regular stock in trade. He did not walk out of my meeting and summon a press conference to denounce the Anglo-Irish talks, still less call his followers out on the streets in protest. Nor did he make specific threats, eg about another Protestant workers' strike. I do not think that he will take active steps to try to stop the negotiations, though he will no doubt continue to denounce them and there is a risk that suspicion of betrayal will be an ingredient in the disorder which may well accompany this summer's marches. I believe that the RUC can cope with this, but I shall be keeping the matter under careful review with the Chief Constable. If an agreement is eventually signed it will certainly be denounced by the Unionists and there may well be some disorder. Much will depend on the prevailing security situation and on the way in which any agreement is presented: the prospect of enhanced security co-operation will be an important selling point with the Unionists and if it can be shown to be producing results could help to reconcile them to the agreement.

8. There are clearly dangers ahead. We cannot yet be sure that an agreement of the sort proposed will secure the degree of support from the SDLP that we want, nor that the Unionists can be persuaded to acquiesce in it without violence. But on the whole I found my meetings with the party leaders encouraging, rather than the reverse. Nothing emerged which causes me to suggest any change in the policy which we are now following. To promise immediate and radical changes in the security forces

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PERSONAL

to please the SDLP, quite apart from the operational consequences, would I am sure provide a very serious reaction from the Unionist majority.

9. I am copying this minute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

N. Howard
Private Secretary
for^{DH}

(Approved by the Secretary of State and signed in his absence in Belfast)

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