

Minutes of a Meeting of the Northern Ireland Committee

Thursday, 4th February, 1982 at 4.15 p.m.

Present: Sir John Biggs-Davison (Chairman), Mr Stanbrook, Mr Brown, Mr Silvester, Mr Goodlad, Mr Mates, Mr Arnold, Mr McNair-Wilson, Mr Amery, Mr Neubert, Mr Lloyd, Mr Gow, Mr Horden, Mr Proctor, Mr Marlow, Mr Robert Atkins, Sir Nigel Fisher, and the Duke of Abercorn.

Guest: Mr James Molyneaux, who, at the invitation of the Chairman, addressed the Committee and answered questions.

Mr Molyneaux's Address

Mr Molyneaux referred first to the events of last November. The Anglo-Irish talks and the murder of Robert Bradford during a severe security crisis had 'brought unionists almost to the point of renouncing and repudiating the union'. Many had reached the conclusion that it was absolutely vital to get Stormont back in order to bring security under firm unionist control, and to prevent further Anglo-Irish summits. More recently the predominant mood in the province had been one of uncertainty, caused by prolonged speculation about the government's intentions stimulated by the leaks from civil servants. Once again the civil servants were harming the unionist cause - as they had immediately after the last general election when they successfully deflected the government from its manifesto commitment to a regional council, and undermined the agreement forged between himself and Airey Neave.

Turning to Mr Prior's proposals, Mr Molyneaux said that they presented three very serious problems:

- (1) A consultative Assembly would cause the government endless trouble: indeed, it would render the province virtually ungovernable. No-one in the assembly - not even unionist members - would be able to defend, or support, the government's policies.
- (2) A weighted majority of 70% would give a veto to a minority party which could be on either side of the unionist/republican divide.

- (3) A mixed cabinet of Ulstermen and Westminster politicians would make collective responsibility impossible, and provide a recipe for confusion.

As regards the concept of 'rolling devolution', he felt bound to regard it with grave suspicion - for who knows where it might eventually roll to.

Mr Molyneaux went on to say that he shared Mr Whitelaw's view that Stormont had provided 'close contact government'. He now felt (as the Conservative party had done before the election) that it would be intolerable to restore devolution in a rigged form, and inconceivable that any government would restore it in roughly a pre-1972 guise. In these circumstances the government should concentrate on improving direct rule - but without using the term 'integration' to describe what it was doing.

#### Questions to Mr Molyneaux

Mr Mates pointed out that the Secretary of State was seeking to help the Ulster Unionists, and end the drift to extremism.

Reply: the Unionists' position would not be improved by the establishment of a talking shop, where irresponsibility would be at a premium. The most severe blow that the party had suffered was not (directly) due to any of Paisley's activities, but to the Conservative party's failure to implement its manifesto: a Regional Council would have made it possible for the different parties to work together without the insuperable problem of power-sharing.

Mr McNair-Wilson asked whether the Unionists feared that parliament might be asked to reconsider the extra seats.

Reply: the process did seem to be taking a long time, and pressure must be kept on civil servants.

Mr Arnold said he was confused by the Unionists' present position, particularly as regards devolution and local government reform. After voicing approval for the idea of a security committee in the Assembly, he went on to express the hope that Ulster Unionists would sit again with the Conservatives.

Reply: the Unionist party had for long held that local government reform should not rule out devolution in the long term. None of the initiatives produced by successive governments had satisfied Unionist criteria for devolution. As regards relations between the two parties, improvements would come more easily if they could be seen to be working together on practical policies.

Mr Amery asked whether there really was a difficulty about extending local government powers. Notwithstanding the fact that 'Stormont did a splendid job', he felt that it would be better if the voice of the province was heard with the maximum authority at Westminster, instead of being muffled by devolution.

Reply: Stormont had indeed isolated Northern Ireland from the mainstream of politics. A reformed system of local government would have a vast apparatus of safeguards: and in the last resort difficulties could be overcome by 'the Poleglass method' (the threat of direct action by a Stormont department). The reason why the SDLP opposed local government reform had nothing to do with discrimination: it was because such reform provided no scope for Dublin.

Mr Marlow drew attention to the government's failure to show positive commitment to the union. Mr Molyneaux said he felt that the Conservative position had become rather neutral: and he would like a more positive statement.

Sir John Biggs-Davison raised the issue of border polls to which Mr Molyneaux declared opposition on the grounds that they stimulated the belief that a united Ireland was coming nearer.

Mr Murphy referred to the desirability of improving relations between Conservatives and Ulster Unionists which, if accomplished, would make it possible for an Ulster M.P. to hold office again. Mr Molyneaux replied that such a development was at present politically very difficult.

Mr Proctor expressed concern about the government's failure to implement its manifesto, which meant that there might be nothing to put into the next manifesto (since all initiatives to restore devolution would have come to nothing). Mr Molyneaux reminded members of Airey Neave's view that a small commission would be needed to prepare the ground for a Regional Council. The case for establishing such a body could be pressed.

Sir John Biggs-Davison agreed that devolution should be ruled out because the different interpretations that had been canvassed were mutually exclusive.

Sir Nigel Fisher deprecated moves towards an initiative which seemed likely to fail, and asked whether the Ulster Unionists would support a simple continuation of direct rule. Mr Molyneaux in reply said that in his view the alternative to the government's policy was cautious movement to improve direct rule.

The Chairman, in thanking Mr Molyneaux for meeting the Committee, expressed the hope that the means could be found to improve relations between the two parties.