

Note of a meeting between the PUS and NICS Permanent Secretaries held in Stormont House at 9.20 am on Tuesday 11 January 1977.

Present:

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| PUS | Mr J Finney |
| Mr R H Kidd | Mr J F Irvine |
| Mr W E Bell | Mr J M C Parke |
| Mr R H A Blackburn | Mr A A Pritchard |
| Mr K P Bloomfield | Dr W G H Quigley |
| Mr A C Brooke | Mr K R Shimeld |
| Mr N Dugdale | Mr J A Young |

1. In giving his customary rundown on the political/security/parliamentary scene, the PUS reported that the debate in December on the renewal of the Emergency Powers legislation had gone well. It was encouraging that the Secretary of State's firm style and stance had found acceptance in the House. Over the Christmas period there had been something of a flurry over security statistics which seemed to show that there had been little improvement, indeed a deterioration, compared with 1975. The Secretary of State had however since put out a statement comparing 1976 with 1974 and demonstrating that the figures for bombings and shootings showed an improvement.

The other significant Parliamentary occasion since the last meeting had been the debate on the Scotland and Wales Devolution Bill. This had triggered off a debate on Northern Ireland in the course of which Mr Molyneaux had announced his ideas on administrative devolution for Northern Ireland. The exact significance of this proposition was not clear. Various interpretations had been put on it, but the most likely was an approximation to the 'County Council' approach considered by the Janes Committee. Those Northern Ireland members who sought full legislative devolution or nothing, rejected the concept; others viewed it as a step towards that objective. The SDLP had adopted a cautious stance. The PUS did not see any intervention by Government at this stage; the pot would be allowed to simmer.

The PUS went on to give an account of his recent visit to Dublin and his assessment of the political scene in the Republic, including the approach to a general election later in the year and the position vis-a-vis attitudes to the SDLP. Commenting on 'special category', the PUS said that this issue was at the heart of the security/political situation. Government was winning the battle and Ministers were being advised to stay on course. It was important that Government should not be seen to be vacillating. If Government won the battle the spin-off effects might well be surprising.

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On the internal government front, PUS believed that Junior Ministers were becoming increasingly restless about their role and that in addition to getting out and about, opening hospitals etc, efforts should be made to render their role more purposeful by arranging for them to speak to bodies of standing and responsibility and be seen to have direct involvement in and concern for the problems of Northern Ireland. On the press censorship issue, the Secretary of State did not support the idea of censorship in reporting the Northern Ireland violence and would be replying to the letter from the NUJ giving them this assurance.

2. In the course of discussion various views were expressed on the Molyneaux administrative devolution proposals which, it was felt, represented a simplistic approach to the general question of devolution. The financial aspects of such a plan would need to be carefully examined. When the Janes Committee had considered the County Council approach, it had been accepted that such a Council would not be meaningful without powers over housing, in which case the power sharing issue would again be raised. It did not therefore offer any solution to the problems on which the Assembly had foundered and on which the Convention had been unable to agree.

The PUS confirmed that financial powers, control of the economy of Northern Ireland, incentives to industry etc, would not come under administrative devolution, save in very limited ways. Fears were expressed that any local 'assembly' was more likely than not to create undesirable bottlenecks. It was suggested that the power sharing issue might not in fact be the most difficult problem for any administrative authority (there could be a Committee structure such as that proposed for Wales) but rather the identification of areas of responsibility for it, which would not cut across those of Central Government and the District Councils.

The PUS commented that if the main idea were to gather momentum and secure broad political support, any administrative difficulties were likely to be swept to one side. Things could reach the stage where the Secretary of State would have to intervene and bring the Northern Ireland political parties together, essentially with a successful outcome in view, and in that situation it would be useful to know what exactly the administrative points were. Any steps which might be taken to identify these areas and spell out the financial difficulties would be time well spent. The PUS stressed however that in view of political and public sensitivities on this issue generally, it was essential that any work which might be done should be conducted quietly and discreetly.

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3. Dealing with some questions on special category status, the PUS told members that the number of 'protestors' was reducing; not increasing. The suggestion was made that there was scope for more public education directed against the whole idea of special category, but the PUS explained that it was the intention to treat the issue as a long haul. It was not in the Government's interests to try to stimulate immediate resolution of the issue. Experience had shown in any event that the Information Service should confine itself to facts rather than assertions. Dealing with the question of whether special category would ever be removed from those who already held it, the PUS said that the numbers would soon be reduced from 900 to 200; a plateau would then be reached after which point no further major reductions could be expected for a long time, since those remaining would have very long sentences. It was difficult to judge when a 'life' prisoner was fit to be released and the question of an amnesty was one to be treated with great care. The Secretary of State in a recent speech had made reference to an amnesty and this had been seized upon by Northern Ireland MPs. The present Secretary of State was accepted as a man who spoke with conviction and vigorous candour and he should not be drawn into vague or ambiguous statements, particularly on such delicate subjects. There must be no Ministerial ambiguity on fundamental points, a failing from which Northern Ireland had suffered in the past.

The word 'amnesty' had also been used in a public debt context. Since at a given point in time all debts became irrecoverable, it was suggested that there might be a case for a moratorium for all concerned. Similar arguments might be applied to 'special category'; if things were wrong with the system there was a case for changing it to one which was wholly defensible and then to stand over it.

4. Other matters touched on briefly were -

Ministerial visits

The timing of Public Expenditure issues, taking in the ASN and Quigley Reports.

5. Date of next meeting.

Tuesday 1 February 1977 at 9.20 am.

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