

Prime Minister

NORTHERN IRELAND

1. John Coles handed to me this afternoon the Memorandum prepared by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which is to be considered by the Defence and Overseas Policy Committee of the Cabinet tomorrow.
2. I regret that I have not had more time in which to consider the Memorandum and in which to prepare this note.
3. I remind you of the words of our Manifesto:-  
"In the absence of devolved Government, we will seek to establish one or more elected regional councils with a wide range of powers over local services."
4. The reference to "one or more elected regional councils" was, of course, to the equivalent of one or more County Councils - and one, two (or even three) County Councils would have been appropriate to a population of 1½ million.
5. Airey knew that there could never be a return to Stormont. But he also recognised that in a democracy there must be Government by the majority, provided that the essential liberties and rights of the minority were protected by a just law. But the protection of liberties and rights of the minority does not mean power sharing, any more than it is necessary for the protection of Labour or Liberal voters to have Labour and Liberal Ministers in your Cabinet.

It would be difficult for you to share power with Mr Roy Mason and Mr Roy Jenkins, even though both are, I believe committed to the survival of the United Kingdom, as an independent sovereign state. But it would be much more difficult for you to share power with Dr Paisley (who in Enoch's view wants to see an independent state of Northern Ireland) or <sup>with</sup> Gerry Fitt (who wants to see Northern Ireland incorporated into the Republic).

6. Yet the Memorandum of the Secretary of State does envisage power sharing so that decisions are taken not by a majority, but by a majority of 70%; furthermore, the Secretary of State clearly envisages that a new Northern Ireland "Executive" (with these powers) would itself be power sharing so that its members would include those who believed in the Union, those who want Northern Ireland to be an independent state, and those who want to incorporate Northern Ireland into the Republic. This is doomed to failure.
7. I disagree, fundamentally, with the first eight paragraphs of the Secretary of State's Memorandum. For years, there has been a misconception that it is necessary to "do something" and that there has to be "political development".
8. Sometimes the wisest course is not to try to do anything spectacular.
9. There are three particular objections to the proposals of the Secretary of State:-
  - (a) A Consultative Assembly would be likely to be composed of a large number of "Paisleyites", a significant number of Republicans and only a smattering of "moderate" Unionists and Republicans.

Few, if any, members of the Assembly would be well disposed towards the Government. The Assembly would, in the literal meaning of the word, be "irresponsible".

(b) A weighted majority of 70% gives, in effect, a veto to the Republicans or to the Paisleyites.

(c) To seek to combine Republicans and Unionists in the same power sharing Executive is as absurd as asking Petain and De Gaulle to sit in the same Cabinet in 1940.

10. The surest guarantee of fair treatment for the minority in Northern Ireland is that the Province should be governed as closely as possible to any other six Counties in the Kingdom. Some District and (certainly if there were three) some County Councils, would be controlled by Republicans as there are Labour and Tory controlled Councils in all Great Britain. I believe that the Secretary of State is moving in what is fundamentally the wrong direction; that his proposals are doomed to failure; that far from restoring stability and confidence to Northern Ireland they are certain to cause further uncertainty and disunity; that they are likely to produce an Assembly administered by extremists on both sides; and that they will arouse substantial hostility within our own Party.
11. I fear that the Government, which is on the whole, disinterested in Northern Ireland, will back Jim's proposals. It may be that the best way of preventing this initiative is the absence of Parliamentary time this Session and the desirability of getting our new Housing Bill through this Session. I certainly think that any Northern Ireland Bill would be highly controversial and would be strongly opposed by a significant number in both Houses.

15th February 1982

IAN GOW