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 N.I.O. LONDON

cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B  
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 PS/Mr Fell - B  
 Mr Thomas - B  
 Mr Watkins - B  
 Mr Bell - B  
 Mr Williams - B  
 Mr Maccabe - B  
 Mr Brooker - B  
 Mr Kyle - B  
 Mr Archer, RID - B  
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Mr Daniell, SIL - B

**BELFAST CITY COUNCIL: JOINT DECLARATION CAUSES CONFUSION**

Summary

The debate on the Joint Declaration allowed all parties to re-state the public positions currently developed by their leaders. Tactical voting ensured that the SDLP motion plus UUP and DUP amendments were all voted down. Afterwards, Reg Empey privately expressed his views on the need to maintain political momentum.

Detail

2. The debate on the Joint Declaration contained few surprises other than the fact that it was conducted in a good-tempered and generally well-behaved fashion. The SDLP commended the Joint Declaration as a balanced document which threatened no-one, but which presented a challenge to all. While their considered response to the Joint Declaration could not be postponed indefinitely, the Republican movement must be given some time to escape from the gun culture of the last 25 years. The UUP for the most part followed Molyneaux's hint of not finding the Joint Declaration to be good or bad, although Chris McGimpsey's textual analysis came close to



suggesting that it made Articles 2 and 3 obsolete: the need for accountable democracy was heavily promoted. The DUP and various independent Unionists saw the document as a source of unmitigated evil, which (a) represented only the starting point for HMG's negotiations with the Republican movement because the real negotiations had taken place under cover of the Joint Declaration and would continue; (b) had hypnotized the UUP into betraying one million Protestants; but (c) was fully consistent with HMG's track record of duplicity over the past 25 years. The Alliance Party urged Sinn Fein to get on board the peace train before it left the station without them: John Alderdice deplored the fact that the Council was presented with a choice of motions, when in reality the positions of most of the parties were congruent; but his proposal that the meeting should adjourn for 15 minutes to allow the SDLP, Alliance and UUP traders to formulate an agreed motion was heavily defeated. Sinn Fein stuck rigidly to the point that the Joint Declaration was still being evaluated, and clarification of key concepts was still required. HMG's hard-nosed attitude was not helpful - the need for dialogue must be recognised.

3. The most surprising feature of the Debate was the decorum with which it was conducted. Most of the heckling was good-natured, and largely confined to the Unionist factions provoking each other. The views offered by Sinn Fein were listened to politely, and even the equipoised blandness of the Alliance contributions prompted no atavistic displays from the boot-boy elements. The central area of philosophical disagreement lay with the concept of self-determination; but since each grouping appeared to prove to its own satisfaction that its interpretation was the only true one, there were no displays of ill-feeling. The same rational approach informed the voting, where carefully-calculated displays of opposition and abstention ensured that both amendments and the main motion were voted down.



4. In conversation afterwards Reg Empey stated that this orderly approach to business was now the rule, rather than the exception. The eight RUC personnel who had traditionally attended City Council meetings had been returned to Barracks, and the Council was now beginning to take pride in the fact that its proceedings were somewhat more dignified than those of the House of Commons!

5. With regard to the wider political picture, however, Empey was anxious to emphasise the need for HMG to maintain the momentum which has been generated by the Joint Declaration. It was crucial that the initiative did not pass to the Republican movement (which he suspected would prove unwilling or unable either to accept or reject the Joint Declaration). The UUP face a crucial by-election in East Belfast in February (to fill Tommy Patton's seat) and risks a drubbing if Molyneaux's support for the Prime Minister was not clearly seen to be bearing fruit. Early moves in the Commons to establish the Northern Ireland Select Committee would be an obvious form of reassurance: the probability of Labour opposition (because of their new policy of non-cooperation with Government) and SDLP ritual objections should not be allowed to delay progress.

6. Empey also felt that there was some mileage to be gained from re-jigging the legislative programme to increase the number of Northern Ireland Bills (or Northern Ireland inclusion in UK Bills). He appeared to accept that there could be technical difficulties in achieving this (to say nothing of the integrationist implications), but seemed genuinely concerned to see legislation by Order in Council reduced as much as possible.

7. Regarding political progress he was gloomy. The UUP position paper of November 1992 was not their last word, but gave a fair indication of their general position. Without HMG (or both Governments) exerting extreme pressure, he did not see Hume making any meaningful contribution to renewed round table discussions: he would block progress as before. Empey, indeed, is already thinking



in terms of fall-back positions, and is undertaking some research into the idea of the Secretary of State's Advisory Council which was floated during the early 1970's. We pondered on whether such a body could be used to allow constitutional parties to make a positive contribution to the discussion of key issues in a format which did not prejudice their wider position (and which might, therefore, prove acceptable to the SDLP).

8. Empey was also anxious to ensure that both Governments took on board the message that firm action would have to be taken against the Republican movement if they procrastinated beyond the end of January in responding to the Joint Declaration. He felt that UUP grassroots support for Molyneaux's position was already under considerable strain, and claimed that even John Alderdice was becoming nervous. While recognising the need to allow the Republicans some time to reach a view on the Joint Declaration, HMG must not be lulled into a protracted period of dialogue, otherwise the consensus on the Joint Declaration would quickly unravel.

Comment

9. There was little in what was said in the debate or after which was significantly at variance with the public positions of the parties. The UUP awareness of their electoral vulnerability is increasing however; and the DUP are making no secret of the fact that Sinn Fein's delay in responding to the Joint Declaration is regarded as vindicating their hard-line approach.

[signed]

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