

NATIONAL ARCHIVES**IRELAND**

Reference Code: 2005/7/631

Title: Report by Seán Donlon, Department of Foreign Affairs, of a meeting between Minister for Foreign Affairs Garret FitzGerald and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Merlyn Rees, discussing the recent collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive and security matters.

Creation Date(s): 16 June, 1974

Level of description: Item

Extent and medium: 5 pages

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Access Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

DRAFT

1. Dr. G. FitzGerald, Minister for Foreign Affairs, had dinner in London on 14 June 1974 with Mr. Merlyn Rees, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. The Minister was accompanied by Ambassador D. O'Sullivan and Mr. S. Donlon of the Department. The Secretary of State was accompanied by Mr. Frank Cooper, Permanent Secretary, Mr. P.J. Woodfield, Deputy Secretary, NI Office and Sir Geoffrey Arthur of the FCO. The discussions were entirely informal and no notes were taken on either side. The main points discussed were as follows.

2. Analysis of the collapse of the NI Executive. The Secretary of State said that the Loyalist victory had been absolute and that once the strike tactic was embarked on, there was no possibility of defeating it militarily. The loyalty of the Army to the British Government was never in doubt and reports to the contrary were mischievous. Reports about the role of the NI civil service were greatly exaggerated and there was no suggestion of the Secretary of State by-passing the NI Executive and directing the work of the civil service. Security matters remained at all times the responsibility of the Secretary of State and neither the Executive nor the NI civil service were normally brought in on the security meetings. Otherwise, many of the issues ^{arising out of the strike} ~~involved~~ were essentially ones involving the Executive and there was no question of the British by-passing the Executive. At a very early stage in the strike, the Executive had, however, virtually ceased to govern and with the notable exceptions of Faulkner and Hume, the Ministers simply sat around and did nothing. The situation was particularly demoralising for Faulkner who saw Ministers from his own party moving towards support for the strikers and SDLP Ministers "running down to Dublin" at a time when he needed all the support he could get. Though Faulkner was now virtually finished - when he returned

-2-

from holidays in a week or two he would find almost all his Assemblymen had deserted him and were heading back to the Official Unionist Party - one could not help but admire the efforts he had made to keep the Executive afloat. Hume's efforts had also been magnificent though he sometimes showed a serious lack of understanding of the technicalities of the power generation and distribution system and this tended to distort his judgement as to what was or was not politically feasible. The Minister for Foreign Affairs drew attention to the enormous difficulties arising from the fact that all the key workers for the NI Electricity Board were from one community, that all the power stations were located in majority areas and that, though this was well known to successive British Governments since 1969, there had been no obvious efforts to deal with it. The Minister also drew attention to the support given to the strike by BBC Northern Ireland and though the British side argued that they did not have the legal means for dealing with this situation, it was notable that they made no effort to defend the BBC position.

3. The Immediate Future. Most of the discussion during the meeting centred around what would happen in relation to Northern Ireland in the next few months and in particular about the holding of elections. Rees said that there was absolutely no prospect of forming a new power-sharing Executive on the basis of the present Assembly. Before Westminster went into recess in July, he would have to face Parliament not only to ask for an extension of the period of prorogation and to seek an extension of the period of operation of the Emergency Provisions Act 1973, but also perhaps for other measures necessary to ensure the day-to-day administration of Northern Ireland. It would be unreal to face Parliament in July and pretend that power-sharing on the basis of the present Assembly was a possibility. It was therefore clear that he would have to announce some positive move in July and he

-3-

was thinking in terms of making an announcement then about the holding of an Autumn election probably for a constituent assembly with clearly defined terms of reference. This would not only satisfy the Westminster demands but would also avoid a political vacuum in Northern Ireland over the next few months. The Minister for Foreign Affairs argued strongly against this course of action pointing out that while everyone accepted that an Autumn election in Northern Ireland was inevitable, there was no need to announce it in July and thereby immediately launch all sides into an intense and bitter election campaign at a time when people had polarised to their most extreme positions. It seemed particularly unfortunate that the needs of the NI situation should take second place to the needs of Westminster. Though the Minister advanced and fully argued the points against making an election announcement as soon as July, the Secretary of State did not give any indication that he would do otherwise and the position the Minister finally urged was that no such announcement should be made without full consultation with moderate opinion in Northern Ireland, especially as represented by the parties comprising the former Executive. Though not made in direct response to this point, the Secretary of State remarked that much of the trouble in Northern Ireland over the last five years might have derived from the fact that they had taken advice too often from moderates which had proved to be wrong. (When leaving the Reform Club after dinner, Cooper remarked to Donlon that only the para-military groups had argued with the same strength against early action on elections.)

4. Role of the Army. The Secretary of State made a number of references in the course of the evening to the changing role of the Army and remarked very bluntly at one point - and it was not made clear whether he was talking in military or in more general terms - that the IRA could not be defeated. Since his appointment he had been looking at all possible ways of reducing the Army's

role and he instanced the withdrawal from the Derry area over the last four months of about 1,500 troops. It was too early yet to judge if this had a direct effect on the level of violence there but there was certainly no obvious change in the pattern which tended to be rather erratic and unpredictable in Derry at the best of times. The Secretary of State inquired - but not with any great enthusiasm - if there was anything more which the Republic could do to assist in tackling the IRA. He mentioned in passing that cross-border co-operation was now better than it had ever been and when the Minister pointed out that the problem of IRA violence was essentially a Northern Ireland one and that it would be unrealistic to expect that anything we could do would substantially change the IRA campaign in Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State did not pursue the matter. (It may be worth noting that at no stage during the evening did he raise either the holding of the proposed security meeting or the law enforcement legislation. Nor was the Strasbourg case mentioned in any way.) Sir Geoffrey Arthur did make some rather harsh remarks about the difficulties which people in Britain had in understanding our ineffectiveness in dealing with the IRA - he referred in particular to the Gaughan funeral - but in doing so succeeded only in establishing his own lack of familiarity with the general situation in Ireland, north and south.

5. Internment in Northern Ireland was discussed in some detail, both in a general political context and in the context of renewing the Emergency Provisions Act. The Secretary of State said that the Gardiner Committee was about to review the Act but added that this review would not be completed before July and that given the present security situation, he would therefore have no option but to renew the existing Act in July. While he was in principle committed to releases and would have done so on the day the Sunningdale Agreement was signed, he was under enormous

-5-

pressures not to release both from the Army and from people in Britain such as his own constituents who were becoming increasingly concerned for the lives of the soldiers. In addition, many of the minority in Northern Ireland felt that some of those now inside could not be released in the present situation. He was conscious, however, of the SDLP's problems arising out of internment and would continue to see how the conflicting factors involved could best be resolved.

6. The Minister mentioned to the Secretary of State his intention to widen contacts with various political groups in Northern Ireland and said that since many of these were not prepared to come south it would be necessary for him to travel to Northern Ireland from time to time. The Secretary of State did not raise any objection to this nor did he show any particular enthusiasm for it.



Seán Donlon

16 June 1974

c.c. Minister
Ambassador, London
Secretary ✓