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Taoiseach's visit to Stormont, 11 December, 1967

At the invitation of the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, the Taoiseach went to Belfast on the morning of Monday, 11 December, for a meeting with Captain O'Neill and members of his Cabinet. The Taoiseach was accompanied by the Secretary of the Department of Finance and the Secretary to the Government.

After lunch in the Prime Minister's residence, at which Mrs. O'Neill, all the members of the Northern Ireland Cabinet and the Attorney General were present, a general discussion took place in Stormont Castle. Apart from the two Prime Ministers and officials, only Mr. Faulkner, Minister of Commerce, and Major Chichester Clark, Minister of Agriculture took part in this.

Mr. Faulkner's main interest was in obtaining further concessions for admission of Northern Ireland manufactures to the State at a preferential rate of customs duty. He instanced in particular furniture and carpets - furniture as the main category which had been highlighted in the first Lemass-O'Neill talks. Footwear and ropes were also matters of considerable interest to Northern Ireland. Mr. Faulkner also referred to the list of specific products ranging from watch straps to ceramics which was at present before the Department of Industry and Commerce for consideration.

On our side, it was mentioned that the possibility of granting concessions on a purely voluntary and, perhaps, progressive basis to Northern Ireland firms in relation to tendering for public contracts was under consideration.

Mr. Faulkner made a special plea for consideration of the request by the British customs for a concession road across the border between Belcoo and Garrison.

The position regarding cooperation in the fields of tourism and electricity supply was reviewed and considered satisfactory.

The discussion then proceeded to the measures taken on both sides of the border to prevent the spread of foot and mouth disease from Britain. It was agreed to be desirable that the two Ministers for Agriculture should meet soon to review the position. Major Chichester Clark seemed to have some apprehension about the possibility of a complete close-down on passenger and freight traffic but was reassured by the Taoiseach's explanation that this was extremely improbable in view of the practical difficulties and the serious economic consequences. The Taoiseach also dealt with the difficulties in the way of any effective permit system for passengers. The Northern Ministers confirmed that they would find it impossible to operate such a system.

Major Chichester Clark's main interest lay in preserving the continuity of the store cattle trade between the two parts of Ireland. He said that Northern Ireland buys about 20,000 a month on average and he was hoping that some means might be devised to permit cattle sold on farms here to be transported direct to Northern Ireland.

- 2 -

A brief reference was made by the Taoiseach to the difficulty of maintaining two Symphony Orchestras without one bidding against the other for instrumentalists; this had happened to some degree when the Belfast Orchestra was enlarged a year or so ago. He suggested that when occasion required the supplementing of an orchestra, it should be possible to arrange for a loan of personnel from one centre to the other.

The Taoiseach also referred to the exchange of interesting exhibits between the National Museum and the Ulster Museum. He said we were grateful for the cooperation of the Northern Ireland authorities in lending objects for the Rosc Exhibition. He explained the legal difficulties which lay in the way of lending to the Ulster Museum objects in the possession of the National Museum which had come originally from the Royal Irish Academy collection. So far as objects purchased by the National Museum were concerned, however, he said we would be happy to arrange periodical loans to the Ulster Museum. This would apply to such purchases as the recent Killymoon Hoard.

After afternoon tea, at which the Taoiseach and his party met the Northern Ireland Parliamentary Secretaries, arrangements were made for a visit by Captain O'Neill to Dublin early in the New Year, the precise date to be agreed later.

A copy of the communique issued at 4 p.m., when the visit concluded, is appended.

T.K. WHITAKER

13 December, 1967.