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Title: Minutes of a discussion at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on 18 February 1970 between Ambassador of Ireland to Great Britain D O'Sullivan and Minister Plenipotentiary K Rush on the Irish side, and Edward Peck, J Drinkell and others on the British side, held to discuss the Northern Ireland situation.

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Discussion at Foreign and Commonwealth Office on
North of Ireland situation - 18/2/70

Present

Irish Side: Ambassador O'Sullivan and
 Mr Rush

British Side: Sir Edward Peck
 Mr J Drinkell
 Mr D Bendall
 Mr R Burroughs
 Mr W K K White

1. The Ambassador, having called on Mr George Thomson, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster met, by prior arrangement, some senior officials of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office immediately afterwards (see names). Mr Rush was also present. The discussion which ensued dealt almost exclusively with the North of Ireland problem.
2. Sir Edward opened the discussion by welcoming the Ambassador with an assurance that he was always glad to keep closely in touch. The Ambassador responded by saying that he was glad to have this opportunity to talk on the North of Ireland question. There is grave concern in Dublin, he said, about the build-up of arms in private hands, and also about the drift to the Right in the Unionist Party power structure. If there should be a sudden outburst in the North, it was imperative that it should be coped with promptly and effectively.
3. Sir Edward replied that he had already given certain assurances to Mr Rush about a week previously on two aspects of the problem. First, the British are confident that they are

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fully informed about events in Belfast and elsewhere in the area, and, secondly, the troops on the spot are considered to be fully capable of dealing with any eventuality which may arise. He added that the troops had "learnt a thing or two" during the time they have been stationed there, whereas, when they were moved in so hurriedly last August and September, they might have been somewhat at a loss at finding themselves in so unusual a situation - indeed, "a near-civil-war situation". By now, however, the army stands ready and alert to deal with any situation which may arise. He personally felt the army could handle any trouble which might arise, just as they had done so effectively with the Malayan guerilles years ago.

4. In reply to a point by the Ambassador on the implementation of reforms, Sir Edward said there was no question of the reforms being blocked or reversed now, but it must be appreciated that the carrying through of such a programme of reform necessarily took a certain amount of time. That was true of any administration. They were satisfied, however, with the present position, and with the reports they were receiving from Belfast on the steady progress which is being made.

5. As evidence of the drift to the Right in the politics of the area, the Ambassador cited the recent victories of the Paisleyite candidates at the two local Government elections in Belfast. He went on to suggest that Paisley nominees may well be successful also in the impending elections for the Stormont seats occupied until recently by Lord O'Neill of Maine and Mr Richard Ferguson. This led on to a discussion of Mr Paisley's stature and influence. Sir Edward used the analogy of Hitler in criticising Paisley. The Ambassador

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agreed that there was no doubt as to the danger he posed because of his extremist attitudes and his considerable influence over a section of the ordinary people in the North. The fact that some misguided men had been prepared to go to such extreme lengths as to blow up public utilities in their own area- because they believed Mr Paisley wanted this done - (as had emerged at the current trial in Belfast) was mentioned as an indication of how dangerous Paisley could be. The Ambassador mentioned that he had heard suggestions that serious charges could be brought against Paisley, in connection with these happenings, which would result in his being given a very heavy jail sentence, if convicted, However, that might merely be to make a martyr of him. Sir Edward agreed that such martyrdom had better be avoided. Mr Burroughs intervened to say that he also had heard rumours that Paisley had been advised to keep quiet or else charges would be levelled against him.

6. This prompted the Ambassador to inquire about the present position of Miss Bernadette Devlin, to which Sir Edward replied that she is still technically awaiting the outcome of her appeal against the six-months' sentence passed on her at Derry. He went on to inquire whether there was any likelihood of Miss Devlin's standing for election "in the north". The Ambassador refuted any such suggestion. It was the consensus of those present that she was unlikely to be re-elected in the North either.

7. At this stage, Mr Burroughs remarked that Mr Oliver Wright (the British Government's representative attached to the Stormont administration since the crisis last autumn) was of the view that the alleged drift to the Right in the politics of the Unionist Party was not so serious or so pronounced as seemed to be thought generally. The Ambassador questioned whether it was not likely that Paisleyite candidates would win the two vacant Stormont seats already mentioned. Mr Burroughs agreed that they might well

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do so, but even the, in Mr Oliver Wright's opinion, there need be no great cause for alarm about the trend of Unionist Party politics.

8. The Ambassador demurred, suggesting that the loss of those two seats to "Protestant Unionist" candidates might well be the final fatal blow to Chichester-Clark, who was, in fact, already thought in some quarters to be "on the way out". He himself had, in fact, heard it suggested that Chichester-Clark could be succeeded by Captain Brook, who - apart altogether from his reputation as a "Hard-liner" - here a name which had the most ominous implications in Ireland. The British officials expressed the view that Mr Faulkner seemed most likely to succeed Chichester-Clark, should the latter be forced out of office, which eventuality, they did not consider a likely one at present. Mr Rush remarked that the Embassy also had been led to believe that Faulkner might be the next Prime Minister in Belfast, although very recently the name of Mr William Craig had been mentioned in that connection (especially following Craig's impressive showing - as compared with Chichester-Clark and Brook - on the recent BBC Panorama programme about the deterioration of the situation in the North of Ireland).

9. Sir Edward Peck summed up saying that the situation is one which requires to be carefully watched. He thought that a radical solution could not be foreseen "for at least 20 years". However, they hoped that, with the completion of the reform programme, and provided it could be brought into operation despite the resistance of the Right-wingers, there would be a gradual improvement. They, in London, certainly wanted this, because, apart from other considerations, they could not face with

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equanimity the prospect of such a large part of the army being tied up in the North of Ireland - "for NATO reasons as well as for other reasons" - although it would be necessary always to maintain "the normal garrison". In conclusion, he repeated once again that the Ambassador and himself "must keep in touch".

10. In replying, and expressing his appreciation of this offer, the Ambassador remarked that his Minister would, of course, be seeing Mr Thomson on Friday, 20th, when these matters might be discussed again.

11. Before the meeting ended, there was a brief discussion in lighter vein about Sir Andrew Oilechrist's speech to the students at U.C.D. on 14th February. It transpired that the British officials present had not yet seen the full text, but they seemed to have been amused, rather than disedified in any way, by the reports, and even the editorials in the Irish newspapers.

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February 20, 1970