

**NATIONAL ARCHIVES****IRELAND**

**Reference Code:** 2003/17/269

**Title:** Draft minutes and a report of a meeting of the Inter-Departmental Unit on the North of Ireland held in the Department of Foreign Affairs on 8 May 1972, at which questions regarding financial support for the Assembly of the Northern Irish People, the Irish School of Ecumenics, and the Northern Ireland Project, were discussed.

**Creation Date(s):** 9 May, 1972

**Level of description:** Item

**Extent and medium:** 5 pages

**Creator(s):** Department of Foreign Affairs

**Access Conditions:** Open

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

Confidential

Aonad Idir-Rannach um an Tuaisceart  
Inter-Departmental Unit on the North of Ireland

Minutes of meeting held on 9th May, 1972  
at Department of Foreign Affairs

Present: Mr. D. O'Suilleabháin, Chairman, Department of the Taoiseach  
Mr. R. McDonagh Department of Foreign Affairs  
Mr. M. Doyle Department of Finance  
Mr. E. Gallagher Department of Foreign Affairs  
Mr. N. Dorr Department of Foreign Affairs  
Mr. R. Stokes Department of the Taoiseach  
Mr. J. Small, Secretary Department of Foreign Affairs

Question of financial support for the Assembly  
of the Northern Irish People

*Suggested by M Doyle 22/5/72*

A lengthy discussion on this subject was held because Mr. John Hume, co-treasurer of the Assembly N.I. Fund, was pressing the Government for financial support and would be seeing the Minister for Finance in that connection within a few days. Mr. Doyle said he had had a meeting with Mr. Hume on the previous Saturday in the course of which Mr. Hume made the points (i) that he could <sup>character of its position on the question of</sup> profitably use money for relief of distress and (ii) that he would prefer to get no financial assistance at all from the Government if the

amount forthcoming was small and merely intended to cancel existing debts. It was decided at the end of the discussion on that subject that a separate note should be prepared immediately summarising the main points made at the meeting with a view to assisting the Ministers involved in their further consideration of the matter. The text of that note is attached and completes the record of the discussion of that item.



The Irish School of Ecumenics - Request for financial assistance

Mr. Doyle circulated a minute from the Department of Education requesting Department of Finance sanction for a grant-in-aid of £5,000 to be made available to the newly-established Irish School of Ecumenics. It was indicated in the minute that the Minister for Education had been approached by the School with a view to obtaining financial assistance towards its recurrent and capital expenditure for 1972/73, estimated at £16,550 and £25,000 respectively. In the discussion that followed the points were made that many people in the North are opposed to ecumenism; that Presbyterian Ministers are split on that issue; and that the Christian churches were surely in a position to fund a relatively inexpensive project which had as one of its primary aims the elimination of differences between those churches and the creation of greater understanding between them. In view of these considerations the Unit felt it would be inappropriate to accede to the request.

Series of Questions for answer by the Tánaiste

The Chairman read out a number of questions addressed to the Tánaiste by Markpress together with draft replies thereto. The Unit suggested some minor amendments to the suggested replies in certain instances.

Deputy P. Harte - Request for financial assistance for Northern Ireland Project

The Chairman informed the meeting that Deputy Harte had asked for financial assistance from the Government (£300 - £400) in order to finance a worthwhile exercise in community relations at a hotel in Donegal in June. The Deputy had already assisted in bringing together at the same hotel on a confidential basis a number of people from the Shankill Road and the Falls Road in Belfast. The hotel had offered extremely low, uneconomic terms for the purpose of that exercise, hoping, presumably, to reactivate a tourist interest in Donegal among the people of Northern Ireland. Both groups had participated in a frank discussion on the basis of no publicity and this condition had been scrupulously respected. Mr. McDonagh said he had heard privately about that project and was led to believe that it was a direct tourism operation by the hotel involved. Mr. Doyle felt that if secrecy

- 3 -

had to be preserved, as seemed to be the case, then the question of financial support from the Government could not arise. The Unit felt that since the whole exercise had a high touristic content, the matter should be pursued with Bórd Fáilte.

Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Unit was arranged for Monday, 15th May, 1972 at 10 am.

Circulated to:

The Taoiseach  
Minister for Foreign Affairs  
and Members of the Unit.



Question of financial assistance for the  
Assembly of the Northern Irish people

The Inter-Departmental Unit on the North of Ireland considered this question at a meeting on 9th May, 1972 and agreed unanimously that the Government had entered into a financial commitment last year which would have to be honoured. In the course of the discussion on the subject it was suggested that before a political decision is taken in the matter various considerations - Northern Ireland political, domestic political and administrative - would have to be carefully weighed. In this connection the following points were made at the meeting:

- 1) The Assembly was established for political purposes and not for the relief of distress.
- 2) The future of the Assembly was in doubt because of the new political situation in the North and, more importantly, because of the centrifugal forces at work inside the SDLP.
- 3) The political wisdom of reactivating the Assembly at this time might be questionable as it might lead to a regrouping of unionist elements.
- 4) Would financial assistance from the Government be politically embarrassing to the most able and moderate members of the Assembly, John Hume and Austin Currie, having regard to the possibility of their being denounced by colleagues who are suspicious about co-operating with the Government?
- 5) Does the Government wish to gain a political foothold within the North and influence minority politics there, bearing in mind that the Labour and Official Sinn Féin parties are already active in both parts of the country (and that this fact, in some measure, accounts for internal difficulties within the SDLP)?
- 6) If financial assistance is to be given by the Government the following questions arise:
  - (a) how much? (It is believed that £10,000 would cancel existing debts but Mr. Hume's expectations are known to be higher than that);
  - (b) there would seem to be no alternative to a grant-in-aid which means that the transaction would have to be done openly;

- (c) if the grant-in-aid is much in excess of £10,000 and is meant to be a once-and-for-all contribution which would thus cover more than one year a possible administrative difficulty might arise with the Comptroller and Auditor General, as grants-in-aid are designed to cover one year at a time;
  - (d) an open Government contribution would almost certainly evoke opposition from the British which could be countered (i) by asserting our right to be involved in Northern politics and (ii) by indicating the benefit of our supporting moderate politics in the North.
- 7) The Unit noted that the Assembly had entertained hopes at one time of obtaining financial support from the main political parties in the Twenty-Six Counties and had had discussions with party leaders in that connection. The outcome of these discussions was not known to the Unit but it was felt that they were unlikely to be fruitful in the changed political situation in the North.
- 8) Mr. Hume seems presently of the opinion that the Assembly's role is ended but puts in the saver that it might be worthwhile to keep it ticking over in case the political picture should change again. In reply to a suggestion that the Government might now simply contribute enough to pay off bills - mainly advertising costs - he thought this unwise as it would eventually emerge that the advertising costs and the Government contribution cancelled each other out.