

NATIONAL ARCHIVES**IRELAND**

Reference Code: 2003/16/561

Title: Copy note by HJ McCann, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, reporting on a meeting with John Peck, Ambassador of Great Britain to Ireland, regarding a proposed plebiscite on the constitutional position of Northern Ireland.

Creation Date(s): 30 June, 1972

Level of description: Item

Extent and medium: 2 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.

NOTE

The British Ambassador came to see me this morning at his request. He wished to talk about the question of a plebiscite in the North.

I informed the Ambassador of the instructions we had given to Ambassador O'Sullivan for his meeting with Mr. Whitelaw yesterday afternoon and of Mr. Whitelaw's reaction. I mentioned that one of the reasons why the Minister would have liked to have called on Mr. Whitelaw on his way back from Luxembourg was to explain to Mr. Whitelaw our serious misgivings about the plebiscite idea.

The Ambassador himself had obviously some misgivings on the subject and was probing as to what the likely reaction here would be in the event of the plebiscite taking place. I told the Ambassador that, personally, I feared that, if Mr. Whitelaw should persevere with the idea of a plebiscite in the near future, it might well ~~be~~ prove to be his first big mistake which would be a tragedy in view of the skill with which he had handled matters to date. The Unionists in the North have already received adequate and repeated assurances about the North not being forced into a united Ireland against their will. The Taoiseach had also made it clear that the policy of the Government here is unity by agreement. An early plebiscite, as proposed, does not therefore serve any really useful purpose. On the contrary, it will serve to polarise the two communities, cement the intransigence of the Unionists and undermine the moderates in the minority community who are seeking to make progress by political means. Those who have just forsaken violence would therefore be encouraged to return to violence as the only way of making progress.

Given the artificial nature of the Six County structure a plebiscite, apart from its result being a foregone conclusion, would have no real meaning from the democratic point of view. The fact that the British Government should decide to proceed with it in these circumstances might cast doubts in some minds as to their real intentions. I therefore thought that Mr. Whitelaw should, if at all possible, seek reasons for postponing a plebiscite.

I could not say at this point what the attitude of the Government here would be if, notwithstanding the foregoing considerations, the British Government should persevere with a plebiscite. Suggestions have been made and voiced by the ^{Nationalist} Party on the radio to-day that a simultaneous plebiscite should be held in the Twenty-Six Counties - to show the will of the Irish people as a whole on the subject. I could imagine that there might be great pressure on the Government here to arrange such a plebiscite and the possibility is that the minority in the North would boycott the plebiscite there. One could not rule out the possibility also that the IRA might bomb some of the polling booths. The Ambassador interjected that this very thought had occurred to him as it would be the easiest thing in the world to drop a small incendiary bomb into ballot boxes. But more serious than any of this would be the tragedy if the present delicate truce with its possibilities for political progress should be undermined by an unnecessary operation.

- 2 -

The Ambassador at first seemed anxious to discuss aspects of how the plebiscite might be handled to mitigate the damage it might cause but I concentrated on encouraging a postponement by emphasising the dangers inherent in holding it at all at the present time. I gathered the impression that the Ambassador already shared some of my worries but he appeared to become increasingly concerned. The points which appeared to disturb him most were the possibility of renewed violence in the North and also a concurrent plebiscite in the Twenty-Six Counties. He said that he was sending his Counsellor, Mr. Thom, up to Belfast to-day to see Mr. Whitelaw to convey some of his fears to him - he mentioned, in particular, the dangers of violence against polling booths. I think that I had him thoroughly worried in the end. He was talking about making another visit to see Mr. Whitelaw in Belfast himself and wondered aloud whether it might be useful if the Taoiseach sent a political emissary with him - somebody like Mr. O'Kennedy who would not attract too much attention. He thought that it was still premature for Mr. Whitelaw to come to Dublin because of the reaction it would cause in the North. It was always possible for a Minister to see him in London if he should be passing through London on other business on a day when Mr. Whitelaw is in London usually Thursday. I mentioned that the Minister would probably be in Brussels for a meeting of the Ten Foreign Ministers on Wednesday, 19th July, and it is possible that he could look in on Mr. Whitelaw the following day on his return. The Ambassador seemed to think that this would be a good idea if it could be arranged. He emphasised that the thought he had mentioned of the Taoiseach sending an emissary to Belfast was merely his own idea. He even wondered whether I would care to accompany him to Belfast to see Mr. Whitelaw. All this suggests that the Ambassador is genuinely worried about the possible consequences of holding a plebiscite in the autumn. We agreed to keep in touch.

30 Meitheamh 1972