

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code: 2004/15/16

Title: Report, by Ambassador of Ireland to Great Britain D O'Sullivan, of a meeting held on 9 March 1973 between Fine Gael leader Liam Cosgrave and Labour Party leader Brendan Corish, with some Irish officials, and British Prime Minister Edward Heath, Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home, Defence Secretary Lord Carrington, and some British officials, held to discuss the British government White Paper on Northern Ireland, mainly concentrating on the voting system to be used in Northern Ireland, representation at Westminster and the proposed Council of Ireland, with further discussions on the security situation

Creation Date(s): 8 March, 1973

Level of description: Item

Extent and medium: 12 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.

Strictly Confidential

REPORT OF MEETING ON 9/3/1973 BETWEEN MESSRS COSGRAVE,
CORISH AND PRIME MINISTER HEATH.

The meeting commenced at 10 a.m. and finished at midday. The attendance was the same as during the previous day's discussion but the Secretary of State for Defence (Lord Carrington) was present for the discussion on security matters.

At the outset the Irish Side requested confirmation of certain points mentioned at the earlier discussion. These related to PR, the devolution of powers to the Executive of the Assembly and the nature of the administration in the North. Mr Heath confirmed that the General Election in the North would be based on PR and on the Westminster constituencies^(with 100 more seats said). Powers would be devolved only when it was seen that the Assembly would, in fact, have an Executive. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would have the power to veto the type of Executive if he did not agree with it. The Assembly in the North would be unicameral. Mr Corish made the point that it was vitally important to define as clearly as possible the shape of the Executive in the White Paper as otherwise there was a danger that it could be confined to one section of the Northern community only. It was essential that the minority should have an effective voice in the running of the area. Mr Heath replied that the Secretary of State would not agree to a sectarian Executive. What is needed is an Executive truly representative of the two communities, so that they can learn to work together. Lord Carrington intervened to say that the powers to be devolved would

not necessarily be the bones of contention. Mr Cosgrave stressed the need to do away with discrimination in employment and Mr Heath said that this matter will be covered by legislation. Mr Corish called attention to a statement which had been made by Mr Robin Baillie in which he urged the need for a precise formula for power-sharing. The Prime Minister said that once the Assembly was elected the Secretary of State would then meet the party leaders and try to settle the composition of the Executive with them. First of all it was necessary to see what result the Election would produce. Mr Corish indicated that we would have considerable doubts about the possibility of a successful Executive if its composition and functions were not clearly defined in advance. He suggested that Mr Cosgrave and he would think further on the subject on their return to Dublin and would let the Prime Minister have a clear indication of their desiderata.

Mr Corish then raised the question of representation for the North at Westminster. The Prime Minister said that it is not the intention to increase this representation at present on the grounds that Westminster will be keeping a lot of the powers previously exercised by the North. The question of increasing representation at Westminster is, he added, likely to be a very controversial one. He went on to refer to the Royal Commission which is considering the question of devolution of powers to Wales, Scotland and the North and indicated that the fact that the Commission's report is being awaited will be used

as one of the arguments against increasing representation
~~at~~
of Westminster.

The discussion then turned to the question of security. Mr Heath said he would like the advice of the Irish Side on what more could be done in this field. He said there is criticism in the South about the activities of the Army, but the Army is under the strictest instructions to behave correctly and its activities are under constant review. Everything possible is being done to ensure that the Army behaves in an impartial way.

Mr Heath described the sectarian murders as horrible. The problem, he said, of dealing with these is more one for the police than one for the Army. A special Corps has been set up to try to cope, and the Secretary of State is doing his best. The proportion of Catholics to Protestants assassinated in recent months is 2 : 1.

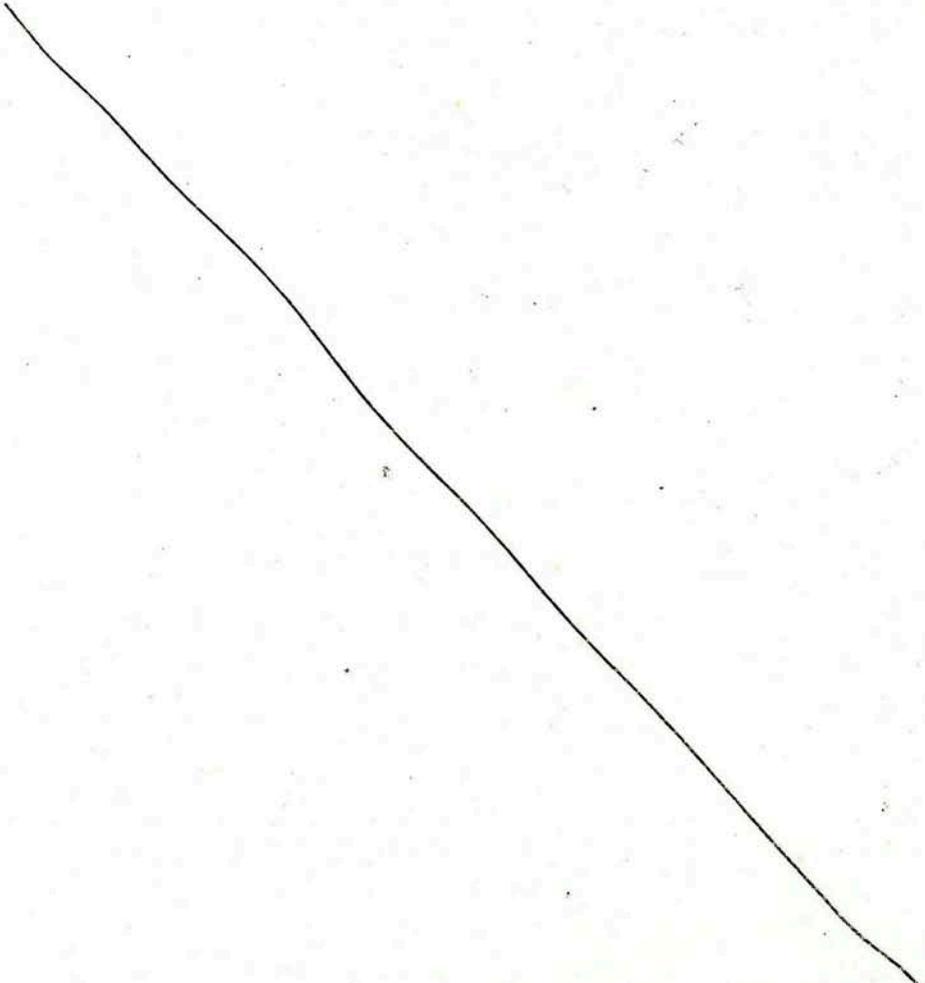
Mr Heath continued by saying that greater success is being achieved in getting people before the Courts. The Diplock recommendations have been accepted and will be given legal effect soon. The Director of Public Prosecutions in the North now comes under the British Attorney General. There are no longer no-go areas in the North. The Secretary of State is doing his best to deal with extreme Protestants. Special precautions have been taken in connection with the Border poll and these will continue for the publication of the White Paper. The White Paper could cause serious outbursts which could have not only a political but an industrial flavour.

Turning to the question of Border security, Mr Heath urged the fullest possible exchange of information about what is happening. He thought that regular discussions between senior people in Dublin and Belfast would be desirable. He referred to Active Service Units operating from south of the Border. These are very highly organised and have been responsible for many deaths inside the Border. This is a most serious problem and coordination of action on both sides of the Border is essential. Mr Heath concluded this part of his commentary by questioning how one could best deal with what he described as "these ruthless guerillas". He regarded them as a long-term problem, but admitted that he is not at all as depressed as some of his colleagues about the possibility of putting an end to violence.

Lord Carrington intervened to say that Derry is now totally quiet and that the trouble is confined mainly to Belfast. There has, he said, been evidence of a different spirit in Derry since IRA influence there diminished. The Army could never, of itself, completely stamp out violence. As regards the allegation from certain quarters that plain clothes patrols are responsible for some of the assassinations, Lord Carrington said that there is no truth whatever in this. These patrols are subject to the same yellow card rules as the rest of the British Army in the North.

Mr Cosgrave said that he could not be more strongly opposed to violence, and it is his intention to take

all possible measures to combat it. Prosecutions under the Offences Against the State legislation will continue. It would be a considerable help to the Dublin Government if there were confidence in the police force in the North. The Border is very difficult to police and the violence in Belfast is indigenous. Lord Carrington intervened to say that Mr Cosgrave's reference to the lack of confidence in the RUC was absolutely valid. There is, he said, a distrust of the uniform. Mr Cosgrave repeated that the maintenance of law and order is not an easy matter, but confidence in the police force is vitally important in this context. He undertook to look into the matter fully when he enters office.



Mr Corish referred to the large numbers of guns, licensed and otherwise, which are held on the majority side and he urged that there should be a withdrawal of licensed arms and an intensification of efforts to pick up illegal weapons. Mr. Heath said that an Order in Council was being introduced in the House that day which would place restrictions on the sale of arms by shops. He continued by observing that illegal arms are the real problem. Mr. Cosgrave thought it would help the atmosphere generally if some of the legally held arms were called in. Lord Carrington doubted if much was possible in this direction as very many of these weapons are needed for genuine protection in rural areas. This concluded the discussion on security matters.

Mr Cosgrave at this point brought up again the question of the Council of Ireland and asked for further clarification as to what is intended in relation to its form and functions. He expressed the view that the Council might in structure be fashioned on the lines of one of the European bodies. It should have specific functions and it should be an Irish machine concerned only with Irish problems. Regional development will be a most important feature of EEC activity and now that we are in the EEC cooperation between North and South on common regional problems is all the more desirable. A main purpose of the Council should be to bring about a growing convergence between North and South and, therefore, the Council should be open-ended with the capacity to evolve.

Mr. Heath questioned whether the Council should be bipartite or tripartite and Mr. Cosgrave indicated his firm view that it should be the former. He went on to

say that in matters affecting Dublin and London these would continue to be dealt with as at present. Sir Alec Douglas Home observed that the Council of Ireland provided for in the 1920 Act never started. Mr. Cosgrave said that that Council was in a different context from the one now proposed. He was convinced that the Council would work better if it were a purely Irish one. Sir Alec intervened to say that if the Council were to be bipartite this would make it more difficult for Britain to lay down what it should do. Mr. Heath undertook to put the bipartite suggestion to his Cabinet. Such a Council could only talk on matters of purely Irish interest. In the wider sphere the Northern representatives would have to fit in with policies agreed by London with the EEC. Again the Council could not discuss security matters or matters related to the judiciary. Mr. Corish enquired whether an agreed system of policing might not conceivably emerge from a Council of Ireland and Mr. Heath said that this is a matter which could be kept in mind for the long term as the Council would be open-ended.

Mr. Corish then made the point that the proposal for a Council of Ireland as at present envisaged is much too vague and is little more than a statement of intent and Mr. Cosgrave urged that the Council would need to be defined as specifically as possible in the White Paper. Mr. Heath said that his objective is to get the Council off the ground. The people in the North would resent dictation about it and the North will want to work out with the South the form and functions of the Council. The Protestant community are very suspicious of the Council and many of them are

strongly opposed to it. Mr. Heath continued by saying that he is doing his best to ensure that the minority community in the North get fair treatment. He then raised the question of possible recognition of the North by Dublin and Mr. Corish said that the fact that representatives of the Government in the South would be prepared to sit down in Council with representatives of the Executive of the Northern Assembly, would, in itself, be a form of recognition. Mr. Heath thought it would be helpful if this point could be made in public and Mr. Cosgrave said he would see whether something could be done in this matter. On the structure of the Council Mr. Heath said that he himself would have doubts about the wisdom of having members of Parliament at one level in the structure. He would much prefer a group that could be relied upon to produce practical results.

Mr. Corish reiterated his concern at the fact that the Council seemed to be rather up in the air. This, he said, would be a serious mistake and he again strongly urged that its functions be defined as clearly as possible in the White Paper. Mr. Heath said they could not do much in ten days. At this point Mr. Cosgrave offered to have the matter considered urgently in Dublin and to put forward practical suggestions. Mr. Heath said he would be glad to receive these views. Mr. Corish said that if the Council did not get off the ground there would in effect be no Irish dimension and Mr. Heath promised to think further on the subject and to see what can be put into the White Paper.

Sir Alec then brought up the question of the Strasbourg complaint. He asked whether Dublin would be prepared

to look again at the Strasbourg case if the over-all situation shows improvement. Mr. Heath said that Dublin is saying that the atrocities complained of are an administrative practice of the British Government. This is a most serious allegation and Britain will have to defend herself with the fullest vigour as her reputation, especially in the EEC, is at stake. If the Strasbourg case goes on it will be necessary for London to make absolutely clear what has been happening, including the fact that IRA activity is organised from the South. It would not be helpful to either country if all this mud-slinging were to go on. Mr. Cosgrave in reply pointed out that he is not yet in Government and that he will look into the matter when he takes office.

Mr. Heath then said that a problem on the British side arises from the fact that it is hard to know with whom to deal on the Catholic side in the North and he wondered what the best way is to influence minority opinion there. Mr. Cosgrave said that his and Mr. Corish's parties have kept in close touch with the minority leaders. He could not, at this stage, say how far he is in a position to influence the situation. The Alliance Party is somewhat mixed. They are good people but there is no certainty as to how far they will get. Mr. Heath enquired as to the position of the NILP and Mr. Corish replied that they have not a great deal of support from the minority. The SDLP have a lot of minority support. They have stuck together and they are the biggest single minority group. Mr. Heath remarked that the Northern Trade Unions have been very helpful.

This concluded the substantive discussion. There was a

brief exchange of views on what might be said to the Press and it was agreed that as the talks were strictly confidential the less said the better.

After the usual expressions of thanks on both sides the meeting concluded at mid-day.

The Irish leaders informed Mr. Heath that they would be making a call on Mr. Wilson and Mr. Heath asked that there should be no disclosure to him of the details of the discussion.

R.O.S.
12/3/73