

NATIONAL ARCHIVES**IRELAND****Reference Code:**

2004/7/2698

Title:

Report of a meeting of the Cumberland, Durham and Northumberland Regional Group of the British Labour Party with members of staff of the Embassy of Ireland to Britain: Donal O'Sullivan, Ambassador, C Whelan, Minister Plenipotentiary, and T Feehan, Local Advisory Officer. Topics discussed at the meeting included the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Area Agreement, the implications of Ireland's impending entry to the European Economic Community upon the Northern Ireland situation, a proposal to establish a regional branch of the British Labour Party in Northern Ireland and the potential implications of this on the Social Democratic and Labour Party [SDLP], the Border issue, the issue of a United Ireland, and the position of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

Creation Date(s):

30 March, 1971

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.

N1/12/2

copy a N1/12/3
N1/12/3

Discussion with a Regional Group of the Parliamentary
Labour Party - 30th March 1971

The Cumberland, Durham and Northumberland Regional Group of the British Labour Party led by The Right Honourable Fred Peart visited the Embassy around 6 p.m. on 30th March and had a 2-hour discussion with the Ambassador, Mr Whelan and Mr Feehan. The other members of the visiting group were:

- Mr James Tinn, M.P. (Cleveland)
- Mr William Mark Hughes, M.P. (Durham)
- Mr Gordon Bagier, M.P. (Sunderland South Division)
- Mr Ted Garrett, M.P. (Wallsend, Northumberland)
- Mr George Grant, M.P. (Northumberland Morpeth Division)
- Mr Ted Leadbitter, M.P. (Hartlepoole).

The visit was requested by Mr Peart.

At the outset, Mr Peart indicated that his Regional Group felt that a full exchange of views with the Embassy was desirable at this stage so as to bring him and his colleagues up to date on developments in Ireland. He laid stress on the special efforts made by the Labour Government to bring the two countries closer together and in this context instanced the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Area Agreement which he claimed conferred special advantages on Ireland.

The Ambassador praised the spirit in which the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Area Agreement was concluded. He said that the intention underlying the Agreement was that it should confer a balance of economic advantages on the two countries. As it happens, however, the Agreement has not been working out exactly as the Irish authorities had expected. British industrial exports to Ireland have expanded at a more accelerated pace than Ireland's industrial exports to Britain. It is not always adequately

- 2 -

appreciated that, while Britain is predominantly Ireland's main market, Ireland is now, after the United States and Germany, Britain's best customer. This information seemed to come as somewhat of a surprise to the visitors. Continuing, the Ambassador said that, while there can be no question as to the importance of the British market for Irish agricultural exports, here too the Irish authorities would have hoped for better opportunities in the British market for some commodities.

Ireland's exports of cattle, beef and lamb to the British market have fared quite well under the Agreement. It is, however, of significance that a number of Ireland's important and sensitive agricultural exports are under quantitative control. This is the case, for example, for butter, cheese and bacon. The Ambassador underlined the inseparable linking which exists between beef and dairy products, and emphasised that an increase in the production of one must necessarily result in an increase in the production of the other. The Ambassador concluded by saying that, while the Agreement conferred undoubted advantages, there were certain anomalies in its operation to which he felt it only right to call attention.

There was a fairly exhaustive discussion on the applications of Britain and Ireland to join the Common Market. Nearly all the visitors had reservations about British entry, and some of them, in fact, were strongly anti-Common Market. The visitors showed special interest in the significance of Ireland's entry from the point of view of the Northern Ireland situation. A full discussion took place on the effects which membership would have in equalising general economic and social service conditions as between the two parts of the island and in removing whatever significance the Border may have as a barrier to the free flow of goods.

The visitors moved on to a discussion on Northern Ireland and the recent visit there of the Rt. Hon. James Callaghan, M.P. The

majority of the M.P.'s present tended to support Mr Callaghan's proposal that a Regional Branch of the British Labour Party be established in Northern Ireland. The general attitude seemed to be that the Protestant and Catholic working-class could be won over to a campaign for the improvement of their economic conditions, and that in the process they would bury their prejudices and different attitudes towards matters of religion and political ideology. Mr Peart expressed general support for Mr Callaghan's project, but the principal advocate of the Callaghan line was Mr James Tinn, M.P. for Cleveland, who was Chairman of the Trade Union Group of Labour M.P.'s in 1969.

Mr Tinn based his argument upon the orthodox socialist approach, namely, that the only important issues for working people are economic issues. He could not see why Protestant and Catholic workers, beset as they were by unemployment, bad housing conditions and other such disadvantages, should not be able to join together in a broad Labour movement. He cited the manner in which trade unionists had kept the peace in the Belfast shipyards during the communal troubles in 1969 and 1970. In his view, if they could do this as trade unionists, they could go further and develop a common policy for economic and social improvements within a Regional Branch of the British Labour Party.

In response to these remarks, the Ambassador pointed out that we would see strong objections to the organisation by the British Labour Party of a Regional Branch in Northern Ireland. He himself had made our objections fully known to Mr Callaghan before his recent visit to Dublin. These objections were also explained in Dublin to Mr Callaghan by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and almost certainly too by the Taoiseach but the Ambassador added that he had not seen a report on the talk with the Taoiseach. We tended to regard the Labour Party as sympathetic on the Northern problem but the setting up of a Regional Branch of the Party in the North would certainly be interpreted in the South as further recognition of the continuing

existence of the Border. Furthermore a new opposition party, named the Social Democratic and Labour Party, had recently been established in the North by a number of opposition M.P's who had formerly worked separately. The establishment of a British Labour Party branch in the area would tend to weaken this new opposition party. It is true that one of the major difficulties of the situation in Northern Ireland has been the retention by the Unionists of power during the whole period since the establishment of Stormont. However the Northern Ireland Labour Party, upon which the new Regional Branch would be based, was opposed to any change in the constitution of Northern Ireland. It was doubtful therefore if it would obtain a sizeable vote from non-Unionists.

In further response to Mr Peart and Mr Finn, it was pointed out that the Border issue was the main issue which mattered at election time in the North. The trade unionists in the Belfast shipyards had been successful in keeping the peace because they avoided the politics of the situation. However, if they organised themselves as a political party, they would immediately be asked how they stood on the Border. Because of the existence of the Border, politics in Northern Ireland had become polarised between the extremists on both sides. With the eventual removal of the Border, such constitutional issues would decline as a force, and the economic issues would become the primary concern of voters. A broad-based Labour Party could probably then be organised with a Regional Branch in Northern Ireland, but it would have to be a broad-based Irish Labour Party in a united Ireland.

Among the visiting M.P's, the only member of the group to support unequivocally a united Ireland policy was Mr William Hughes (Durham), who is, in fact, a Welshman. A graduate of University of London, he was formerly lecturer in economic history at Durham University and is regarded as "the intellectual" of the group. He disagreed with Mr Tinn as to the real issues in Northern Ireland and suggested that economic issues very often require political solutions. Group and national loyalties are frequently more

potent forces than concern about economic and social conditions.

Mr Gordon Bagier (Sunderland, South Division) and Mr Ted Leadbitter (Hartlepoole) also contributed to the discussion.

The visitors also raised the question of the position of the Catholic Church in the Twenty-Six Counties. The Ambassador explained the constitutional provision relating to the special position of the Catholic Church as the guardian of the faith of the majority. He mentioned the public statement by Cardinal Conway that he would not lose any sleep about the removal of this provision from Article 44 of the Constitution. As regards recent State-Church issues in Ireland, there was a considerable amount of difference in the approach of various members of the hierarchy and general clergy to the problems involved. The visitors did not press the point, but there seemed to be a belief that the Catholic Church in the Twenty-Six Counties still had undue influence on public policy, particularly in the fields of education and family life.

The meeting ended with words of thanks from Mr Peart on behalf of himself and the other visitors to which the Ambassador responded by suggesting that they might like to return for another conversation at a later date. The Ambassador also made the point that he would welcome visits by similar regional groups of M.P's from both parties for informal discussions of the kind that had taken place. Individual Embassy staff members will, of course, follow up the meeting through further contact with the visiting M.P's. Indeed, Mr Tinn, Mr Leadbitter and Mr Hughes have asked the Minister-Counsellor to join them at some date after Easter for lunch at the House of Commons. This will be followed up, if not in the context of the House of Commons, then by a luncheon invitation at another place.