

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## IRELAND



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**Title:** Report of a meeting at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office between Ambassador of Ireland to Great Britain D O'Sullivan and R McDonagh of the Department of Foreign Affairs, and Deputy Under Secretary of State Stewart Crawford and other British officials, mainly regarding the proposed Council of Ireland.

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Meeting in Foreign and Commonwealth Office  
on Monday, 1 January, 1973, at 3 p. m.

Present:      British side

Sir Stewart Crawford, Deputy Under-Secretary of State,  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Mr. Philip Woodfield, Deputy Head of Northern Ireland  
Office

Mr. D. J. Trevelyan, Under Secretary, Northern  
Ireland Office

Mr. Kelvin White, Head of Irish Department of F. C. O.

Mr. A. Thorpe, Second Secretary, F. C. O.

Irish Side

Dr. D. O'Sullivan, Ambassador of Ireland

Mr. R. McDonagh, Assistant Secretary, Department of  
Foreign Affairs.

Sir Stewart Crawford welcomed the Irish side in general terms, expressing the hope that the discussion would prove useful and worthwhile for both parties. The Ambassador replied in appropriate terms, recalling that the meeting was a result of the Taoiseach's talk with Mr. Heath on 24th November. The Taoiseach, he recalled, had made a strong appeal to the Prime Minister to make the most of the opportunities now offering and to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. If correct and courageous decisions are not now taken trouble will erupt again. The restoration of peace then could prove a much more difficult matter.

The discussion, which lasted for just over 1½ hours, centered mainly on the idea of a Council of Ireland although other aspects of the situation received comment at various stages. Mr. Woodfield did most of the talking on the British side. He was exceedingly cautious and circumspect in his approach - so much so that at certain points it was very difficult to follow his line of thought. The Irish side had to do a great deal of prompting and questioning in order to obtain some clarification of the British positions. The following is an indication of the final impressions left with the Irish side and of the principal arguments adduced on both sides.

The British side seemed very determined at the outset to stress the difficulties involved in getting Unionists to cooperate in a strong Council of Ireland. They said that they wished to give a lead in this respect to moderate Unionists but they could not impose a Council. The question, therefore, arose of whether it would be useful or desirable to set up a Council with wide powers and functions unless and until it became evident that Unionists were prepared to make it work. It might be better to begin with a Council of a more limited character and make provision for its evolution and development according as the Unionist interest in participation grew.

At this point, the Ambassador enquired whether we were to expect the White Paper to produce some vague ideas about a Council. Mr. Woodfield replied this would not be correct. The intention is that the White Paper will be quite specific on the subject.

The British side also put forward the idea that the process of putting real teeth into a Council of Ireland should perhaps be delayed until a general election for the new-type Northern assembly had been held. The Northern element in any Council would presumably be drawn from the new assembly and it would be reasonable to wait to consult them. Ideally, Dublin should consult with them in order to reach agreement on the Council idea. If it were decided to delay the working out of a scheme for a strong Council until a new Northern assembly was elected, the best step to take in the interim might be to establish a rather simple kind of Council at official level.

The Ambassador said that he had to express considerable disappointment about the general approach reflected in this kind of thinking. He recognised that there may be difficulties in securing Unionist agreement to a strong Council. However, if there is to be a courageous solution of this whole problem, he could see part of it as having to be imposed. It would be a serious mistake to expect that a Council of Ireland would be acceptable either to the minority in the North or the Government in the South if it were set up on a minimal kind of basis with its future evolution left dependent on a change of heart among Unionists generally. There was no evidence at present of any such change. Individual voices among Unionists had expressed moderate views but the bulk of organised Unionism, in its various shapes, seemed primarily concerned with entrenching itself behind the British guarantee. There was no indication of any readiness on their part to recognise what the Green Paper had called the Irish Dimension. If the Irish Dimension were not given flesh and substance in any new proposals, it was difficult to see such proposals being accepted by the Northern minority or, indeed, the national majority. The Ambassador said that our views about the British guarantee were well-known to the British side. It was not the main purpose of this meeting to go into that matter again but its relevance was obvious in view of what had been said by the British side.

Also, the Ambassador added, it seemed that the British side were thinking in quite long-range terms so far as a Council of Ireland was concerned. This in itself was disconcerting. The recent history of the North seemed to show that things inevitably grew worse rather than better when necessary decisions were delayed or postponed.

There was some further discussion on the above lines. The British side emphasised (as, indeed, both sides did at various stages of the meeting) that their thinking was at a preliminary stage and that their ideas had not yet begun to crystallise. However, the divergence of views indicated by these initial exchanges was not resolved and, so far as the Irish side was concerned, it induced a rather pessimistic view of the entire meeting.

Mr. Woodfield asked for an indication of the Irish side's views about the possible structures of a Council.

The Ambassador said that, as the Taoiseach had made clear at his last meeting with the Prime Minister, we wanted a strong and effective Council with a real capacity for evolution. It seemed, therefore, that it should have strong structures. One possibility would be something on the lines

of the EEC-model, i. e. an executive Council comprising Dublin Ministers and their Northern opposite numbers, a Parliamentary Assembly to which elected representatives would be nominated by North and South and a permanent full-time Secretariat. However, we had quite an open mind on the subject and were not putting this forward as a specific proposal at this juncture. It was a matter that would require very close examination. As in regard to so many aspects of the matter, the first step should be for both sides to establish that they were thinking along the same lines.

The British side did not seem to demur at the kind of structures suggested. They asked whether the Irish side would envisage that the ministerial-type Council would sometimes meet at the level of officials. They also asked whether the representatives to the Assembly body would be nominated on the basis of the proportionate strengths of the political parties and whether the machinery of the Council would provide for the setting up of committees or expert bodies as required. The Ambassador replied that all of these ideas seemed to be in line with our concept of what the Council should be.

In reply to a query by the Ambassador, Mr. Woodfield gave the impression that present thinking here favours an executive in the North drawn from the different parties. No decision, he said, has yet been reached as to whether elections to the Assembly will be based on P. R.

Mr. Woodfield referred to what he called two very important considerations, two aspects of the matter on which Unionist opinion was very sensitive. The first was the "recognition" question. Would the South recognise a new Northern arrangement in the context of a general settlement which was otherwise acceptable? By "recognition" he did not mean a constitutional provision. Something less formal, say, a speech by the Taoiseach could be sufficient. The second was the question of accepting provision for the preservation of law and order on an all-Ireland basis.

The Ambassador said the Taoiseach had already indicated to the Prime Minister that the Government would be prepared to accept and support a real and workable settlement. He went on to say that the fact that representatives of a sovereign Government would be prepared to sit in Council with representatives of a subsidiary administration would surely be an important exercise in recognition. Also, the Taoiseach had told Mr. Heath that he would be prepared to consider the possibility of handling the law and order problem on an all-Ireland basis.

The British side brought up the question of whether and how Britain might be involved in a Council of Ireland. It seemed clear to them that some such involvement was necessary in view of the powers that would rest with London and, of course, their financial responsibilities in respect of the North. The Irish side commented that there would be rather obvious objections to an Anglo-Irish Council as such if it were to be a North/South link. It may be necessary, however, to provide some kind of machinery for the involvement of Westminster in matters where it had reserved powers. The British side seemed to accept this.

In relation to law and order questions, the Irish side took the opportunity of emphasising the importance of establishing a policing system for the North which would be acceptable to both communities there. As things stood, the minority had little or no confidence in the R. U. C. A reform of the policing arrangements would be very necessary if any general settlement were to have a fair chance of working. The British side said that this was a problem that they were bearing in mind.

The British side said that the legislation providing for direct rule would be extended for a year but it would be provided that it could be terminated before the end of that year. They were very vague about the date of issue of the White Paper. Mid-February would be the earliest possible publication date but they did not seem to have such an early date in mind. They gave no hint as to whether the Paper would come before or after the border plebiscite to be held on 8 March. They indicated, however, that they hoped to put through any legislation called for by the Paper's proposals before the summer recess.

Finally, the British side suggested:

- (1) that another meeting be held in London on Monday, 22 January, to discuss further the Council of Ireland idea;
- (2) that both sides exchange documents about a week before this meeting, setting out their views as to what functions the Council might have; and
- (3) that a further meeting be held in London on Monday, 12 February, at which the British side would reveal details of their over-all package settlement.

The Irish side said that, subject to the views of their authorities, these arrangements seemed acceptable.

At the conclusion of the meeting Sir Stewart Crawford invited the Ambassador to have a private word with him about other matters. In the course of this brief discussion the Ambassador said that he felt bound to tell Sir Stewart that he and his colleague were quite disappointed with the discussion that had taken place. (He said this mainly because of the unencouraging line taken by the British side in regard to their problems about dealing with Unionism.) Sir Stewart said in reply that he wanted to assure the Ambassador that the British side had no desire whatever to be negative in these exchanges.