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Title: Summary of meeting in London on 7 March, 1974, between Garret FitzGerald, Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Merlyn Rees, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, in which the main points of discussion were the electoral defeat of the Faulkner Unionists, the likelihood of an SDLP [Social Democratic and Labour Party] withdrawal from the power-sharing Executive, the ratification of the Sunningdale Agreement, policing, and internment.

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Summary of meeting in London on 7 March 1974
between Dr. Garret FitzGerald, Minister for
Foreign Affairs and Mr. Merlyn Rees, Secretary
of State for Northern Ireland

1. Mr. Rees's assessment of the current NI situation is dominated by a feeling that there is very deep gloom on the Faulkner Unionist side arising out of their recent heavy electoral defeat and total lack of any political organisation. There was an extreme reluctance on their part to proceed with the ratification of the Sunningdale Agreement at this stage and they were inclined to put it miles into the future. Some members of Faulkner's team, notably Bradford, were even suggesting that they would "have to look in other directions". Their spirits were at the lowest possible ebb and all of us would have to take action to restore their position to the point where the Sunningdale Agreement could be ratified. The new British Government's commitment to the Agreement was absolute and on NI affairs they would not move at all from the basic position of the previous Government.
2. In regard to the SDLP, Mr. Rees said that following his visit to Belfast the previous day they had ~~now~~ ^{him} left in no doubt that they would not stay in a power-sharing Executive unless they got the Council of Ireland. He thought that Faulkner shared this assessment and since he was sufficiently determined to retain power at all costs that he would therefore be prepared to pay the necessary price and accept the Council.
3. Much of the meeting centred on how, given the above situation, the ratification of Sunningdale might best be achieved. The Minister for Foreign Affairs emphasised our wish to proceed as soon as possible and also made it clear that we were in no way in default of obligations undertaken at Sunningdale. We had taken considerable criticism from Faulkner on this score and had felt it necessary to

let it go unanswered in order not to weaken his position still further. Notwithstanding this we were, of course, prepared to do what we could to assist and the Minister, while pointing out that it might not necessarily be possible to accept British suggestions, asked Mr. Rees for his views on what we might do. Mr. Rees said that continuing movement in the matters of defining the status of NI, cross-border security and the area being covered by the Law Enforcement Commission was required. A clarification of the status position was required and there was a general expectation in Unionist circles that this was now overdue. It might best precede moves on any other front and a "major impact" statement might be followed up by a series of additional supporting statements. On cross-border security, the Minister for Foreign Affairs pointed out that though there seemed to be broad agreement between Dublin and London that the co-operation position was reasonably satisfactory, nevertheless we continued to be criticised particularly by the Unionists for our inactivity in this area. Mr. Rees said that what was needed was a PR exercise to convince the man in the street in NI of the Dublin Government's will to take effective action. He would like to give this and other ways in which Dublin might be helpful detailed consideration in the next few days and then pass on any suggestions which he felt might usefully be acted on.

4. Mr. Rees inquired about the expected timetable of the Law Enforcement Commission's activities and the Minister said that a report before mid-April was unlikely. The Minister again reiterated our desire to ratify the Sunningdale Agreement, hopefully, by Easter. Mr. Rees agreed that time was not on anyone's side but did not give any indication of the timetable he envisaged. His main objective at the moment was to steady the Unionist boat. British pressure on Faulkner would certainly be applied towards achieving that end and Mr. Rees seemed hopeful that the desired improvement would have taken place in a few weeks. The Minister for Foreign Affairs expressed concern about the possibility of our doing something now, e.g. on

status, to help Faulkner and then find that he continued to raise the ante and make unreasonable or impossible demands. He also said that the Government would have to give careful consideration to the timing of any statement on status and whether or not it should be part of a series of moves all designed to help Faulkner. He suggested also that continuing British pressure on Faulkner might be necessary. Mr. Rees said that it would be desirable to keep in close touch on these matters as there might, for instance, be some action which he could take to complement or reinforce what we might be doing or contemplating. He envisaged further inter-Governmental contact as soon as the new British Government had had time to settle down though he thought it best to leave open for the moment the level at which the next meeting should take place. The timing of any meeting between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach would in particular have to be very carefully considered though he fully accepted the importance of an early establishment of contact at that level.

5. Other matters discussed during the meeting were:-

- policing: Mr. Rees inquired about the progress we were making on setting up a police authority and was told that legislation was being prepared. The British side explained their recent problem with the RUC arising out of the [REDACTED] case and assured us that no deal had been done with the RUC to calm them down. They themselves realised they had over-reacted - Desmond Boal had had a large hand in whipping up their feelings - and the British Police Federation had played a helpful role in restoring calm;
- internment: The Minister for Foreign Affairs raised the matter and Mr. Rees said that they would be examining the operation of the NI Emergency Provisions Act. In the present

situation, the State would have to retain the right to act against those who bomb and kill. Mr. Frank Cooper gave it as his strong view that the minority community were at present "incapable of taking wholesale releases";

- the Minister for Foreign Affairs raised the incident involving British troops and Gárdaí which took place in the Dundalk-Newry Road on 5 March and said that an apology would be needed from the British side, especially in relation to the threat by the British soldiers to shoot the Gárdaí, to put the situation right. Mr. Rees said that the matter was being currently looked into and it was also indicated that a special report had been sought relating to the incident;
- Mr. Rees said that the anti-Faulkner Unionists were threatening to assert themselves in a big way. He had that morning met Paisley, West and Craig and he had no hope of winning them round to playing a constructive role either in the NI Assembly and certainly not in the Council of Ireland second tier. He hoped that there would shortly be a debate at Westminster at which the "Ulster 11" would realise that the House of Commons climate for them would be a very cold one indeed;
- NI Referendum on Sunningdale: Mr. Rees spent some time discussing this and has certainly not ruled it out though he emphasised that it was a matter on which the timing would have to be calculated very accurately. He did however say that the people of NI would have to have an opportunity of expressing their view at some stage and inquired if there was any thinking in the Republic of conducting a similar exercise on Sunningdale. The Minister replied that while the matter had been raised, no clear view had yet emerged and that there was certainly no merit in holding a referendum in the Republic on the same day as a similar one was being held in NI. This would only serve to confirm the worst Unionist fears.

6. The Minister for Foreign Affairs was accompanied by Dr. Donal O'Sullivan, Irish Ambassador at London, Mr. C.V. Whelan, Assistant Secretary and Mr. Seán Donlon, Counsellor, Department of Foreign Affairs. The Secretary of State was accompanied by Mr. Frank Cooper, Permanent Secretary, Mr. P.J. Woodfield, Deputy Secretary, Mr. R. Seaman, Press Officer and Mr. Reed, Private Secretary (NI Office), Sir Geoffrey Arthur and Mr. W.K.K. White (FCO). The meeting lasted for about 90 minutes.

A.

7 March 1974