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Title: Report by Seán Donlon, Department of Foreign Affairs, on his visit to Northern Ireland on 21-22 March 1974, and mainly concerning his meeting with members of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, with discussions focusing on resistance to the Northern Ireland Executive and the role of Ian Paisley.

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ConfidentialVisit to Northern Ireland 21/22 March 1974

1. I called on Mr. Bloomfield, Permanent Secretary of the NI Executive, in his office at Stormont at 5.30 p.m. on 21 March and handed him two letters for Mr. Faulkner from the Taoiseach. I told him that the date suggested in one of the letters for the ratification of Sunningdale was 5 April but that this should be amended to read 10 April. He noted the amendment without comment and said that both letters would immediately be given to Mr. Faulkner who was still in his office. In reply to his inquiry, I told him that similar letters were not being sent to the heads of the other parties in the Executive, but that a copy of the draft agreement was being given to the SDLP and Alliance Party. I asked one or two very general questions about the proceedings in the Assembly that week, but it was very clear from his answers that he did not wish to enter into any discussion. Our meeting lasted about five minutes.

2. I then went to the SDLP rooms in Stormont where I had arranged to see a group of their Ministers. As the Assembly proceedings had just concluded, many of the 19 were there and I spent about an hour in general discussion before having a more detailed discussion in a separate room with Messrs. Fitt, Hume, Devlin and Currie. Fitt and Devlin had meanwhile had a meeting with Faulkner and it was clear that they had been told in general terms of the contents of the letter from the Taoiseach about the ratification of Sunningdale. I confirmed that we were pressing for ratification in the first half of April and gave them a copy of the draft agreement. In a relatively short discussion - Hume and Fitt had 8.00 p.m. appointments - Fitt was the only one who expressed any reluctance about pressing ahead rapidly. He said that Faulkner's position was not improving at all and that he was having difficulty in ensuring that all his Assembly supporters would turn up next week for the vote on the loyalist motion.

The others tended to discount this and inclined to the view that Faulkner was up to his old trick of using a "crucial vote" situation to postpone developments. Strong words from Hume and Currie persuaded Fitt that the SDLP should discreetly exert immediate pressure on Faulkner, and it was agreed that Fitt and Devlin would see him as soon as possible "to bring him gently along the road". They all agreed that to include Hume or Currie in the mini-deputation would not help to achieve the element of gentle persuasion! Devlin and Hume said that they would like to meet me later on in the evening for a more detailed discussion and we arranged that Currie and I would have a meal at the Culloden Hotel in Craigavad - Hume was hosting a function there for visiting Swedish bankers - and join up with the others at about 11.00 p.m. In the event, Devlin did not turn up and when we were joined by Hume he was accompanied by Mr. Frank Cooper, Permanent Secretary of the NI Office, whom he had casually met in the lobby. Cooper invited us to join him for drinks in a suite of rooms at the hotel which he has as his Belfast "home". He was a most genial and generous host and, though he made some veiled cracks about my "intelligence activities", he went out of his way to make me feel welcome. When we were leaving - admittedly it was about 3.30 a.m. - he went so far as to say that "maybe your visits to Northern Ireland aren't all bad". Before leaving Stormont, I had bumped into Oliver Napier in the corridor and availed of the opportunity to give him a copy of the draft agreement and to have a general discussion. I told him I had hoped to call on him more formally the next day, but he said that he would be absent in London on business. On 22 March I had sessions in Belfast with John Duffy, SDLP General Secretary, J. C. Napier, Solicitor, and Ciaran McKeown of the Irish Press. (McKeown had been outside Bloomfield's office as I left it and, to avoid getting into a discussion with him there and then, we arranged to meet over lunch next day.) I also spoke to P. A. Duffy of Dungannon and arrived back in Dublin late that evening. What follows is a summary of the information gleaned and impressions formed from conversations with these people, rather than an effort to report on the individual conversations.

3. The statement on status made by the Taoiseach on 13 March is generally regarded as having achieved its objective. Oliver Napier, the SDLP and Frank Cooper all agreed that the status of NI was no longer an issue and Cooper said that we should be particularly careful to say or do nothing which might re-open it. He added that the Secretary of State and himself had had to do some work on Faulkner to ensure a helpful reaction. The first draft of a response which Faulkner had shown them had raised so many questions about other outstanding issues, such as security and extradition, that it would have been worse than no statement, but they had finally persuaded him that he should be seen to accept gracefully the clarification offered and leave the other issues over "for the next round".

4. McLachlan's television interview on 19 March and RTE's radio interview next day calling for a re-negotiation of Sunningdale has a curious history. On 19 March the pro-Assembly Unionists caucused in a somewhat disorganised fashion to consider their tactics for the debate on the loyalist motion. Reggie Magee said that he would definitely follow Faulkner into the lobby but that he would nevertheless make an anti-Council of Ireland speech. This idea was apparently not rejected by any of the others present and some, including McLachlan, took it as the mood of the meeting. Faulkner was not present for most of the time because he was attending an Executive meeting. He did drop in briefly, outlined the general approach he proposed to adopt in his speech, but did not wait long enough to catch the reaction of his party. Because of the length of Paisley's contribution to the debate that afternoon, none of the backbenchers had an opportunity to speak, and McLachlan availed of the TV interview to express the Magee line and accept an invitation to talk to John Laird. At a stormy meeting of the pro-Assembly Unionists on 21 March, McLachlan was formally censured for breaking the party line and he now agrees that he made a serious error of judgement. In the eyes of his colleagues the error was not so much in the substance of what he said - it probably does reflect the party's real position - but in the fact that he went public on the matter without party approval. Although most people do

not doubt his loyalty and closeness to Faulkner, McLachlan is not popular with the party backbenchers who regard him as an outsider with little feel for grassroots unionism. They also resent the fact that he is using the limited research facilities at Marlborough House, provisional headquarters of the Faulkner unionists, to brief himself for the Assembly where he asks questions and contributes to debates on all subjects without regard either to the expertise or constituency interests of the other backbenchers, who are largely responsible for financing the headquarters, including McLachlan's salary. The error of judgement is regarded all round as a disaster. It has boosted the UUUC position and given it a degree of respectability which it had so far lacked. It has increased pressure on the SDLP leaders from their backbenchers who do not see that there are ways of dealing with the situation other than by publicly trading insults with the Faulknerites. Above all it has further weakened Faulkner, who now finds himself publicly outflanked, not only by Paisley and company, but also by a man regarded as a close political friend and adviser. Frank Cooper, among others, thought that Faulkner's task of selling Sunningdale had now been made even more difficult than it had been. He did, however, see a minor but significant gain from the whole episode viz. the Faulkner backbenchers, in reacting against McLachlan, might re-discover their backbones and muscles and with their new-found strength go out and help in the selling of Sunningdale.

5. There was remarkable unanimity among those I met that it was essential to deflate Paisley and do it without delay. The election success has inflated his Messianic complex and everything was now being fought on his terms. His anti-Constitution Act motion has shown that he could make or break the Assembly. Without his participation, it was a mickey-mouse gathering. But when he did participate, as he was currently doing, he succeeded in dominating the proceedings, unnerving the Faulknerites and putting an enormous strain on the Executive. Frank Cooper in particular was adamant that Paisley would have to be exposed as a wrecker and as a hate merchant and that it would have to be made clear to NI unionists

that their choice of leader had now been narrowed down to Faulkner or Paisley. If that position were put starkly enough, Cooper's view was that Faulkner could not lose and the implementation of Sunningdale would thereby be facilitated. Cooper had no doubts that if Paisley were deflated, the UUUC would disintegrate. His church was a one man show - 35 of the 36 Free Presbyterian churches are in Paisley's own name, according to Cooper - and his political group was also totally dominated by him. He did not even allow his assemblymen the independence to enter the bar at Stormont, and there was no way that he could bring himself to tolerate anyone who questioned his aims or tactics. Cooper and Paisley have been at daggers drawn since 1972. Their relationship is now at the point where, according to Cooper, he spent the last meeting with Paisley teasing him about his patent leather shoes, his well-cut suits and his expensive 'cuff links. Only in that way could he rattle Paisley and deflect him from whatever propaganda point he had come to make.

6. A subject which was raised by Hume and discussed in Cooper's rooms at considerable length was that of contact between the Provos and the British. Unfortunately, Hume and Currie took different positions which they argued fully and with some feeling. Hume's view was that there was absolutely no reason for talking to the Provos and that it would be an act of treachery on the British part to "continue talking" to them at this stage. Currie, on the other hand, felt that the British should always leave the door slightly ajar, and that at this stage there might be an advantage in enticing the Provos to talks with a view basically to undermining their position in the minority community. After all, if the Provos were seen to be talking to the British, the argument about "imposed" British solutions to the NI situation would be invalidated and, in addition, the Provos could be projected as betraying the internees. The Hume/Currie discussion went on for over an hour with Cooper frequently interjecting but not coming down on one side or the other. His interjections were not at all consistent but he did refer to "an approach" before the general election

and said that given the present level of Provo violence, it would not be unreasonable to expect "a further approach" in the next few weeks. He also said that it was natural for the Provos to be attracted to talk to Rees or Orme because of their contacts in opposition days, but went on to say that he, Cooper, would "not let Wilson, Rees or any of them" get involved in such talks. In any event it was very difficult to talk to the Provos at the moment since not one of their geographic or political factions could deliver the goods and there was no prospect of their re-establishing an effective command structure in the near future. Another of Cooper's interjections was to give an amusing description of talking to Provos whose rules, he said, demanded that they "talk in twos". That, he added, tended to inhibit free discussion somewhat. The most unexpected indication that something may be afoot between the British and the Provos came, however, not in Cooper's suite but in a remark which Fitt made to me at Stormont when he said that on 19 March Faulkner had told him that, on top of his other worries at the moment, was the fear that the British might be talking to the Provos.

7. There was relatively little discussion with Cooper about ratifying Sunningdale, though he did mention that he had heard earlier in the evening - presumably from Faulkner - that we were pressing for ratification early in April. His only remark of substance was to the effect that perhaps we were being rather optimistic. The Secretary of State is meeting the NI Executive for a review of the situation in the afternoon of 25 March and this, together with the next day's Executive meeting, could well produce a somewhat clearer picture than is now the case. After we left the Culloden Hotel at 3.30 a.m., Hume and I went to the Europa Hotel in Belfast where we had a further discussion before retiring. Hume still seems to be generally pessimistic and feels that Faulkner will not honour the Sunningdale agreement, that the SDLP will not tolerate any re-negotiation and that they will pull out of the Executive as soon as it becomes clear that Faulkner is refusing to ratify. From a tactical point of view, Hume would like the Executive to survive at least for another two months so that the SDLP can be seen to deliver a few more

factories and houses - he is not optimistic that they will achieve anything on internment in the present climate of violence - but he says that if it is to break, it must do so as long as possible before the explosive summer marching season. Hume's pessimism, however, does not seem to be widely shared, either within the SDLP or elsewhere. It is thought that Faulkner will do his best to re-negotiate Sunningdale and in particular that he will go right up to the brink to test the SDLP's commitment to a Council of Ireland, but that when the chips are finally down he will accept the package and hope for the best.

8. There appears to be no doubt whatsoever among SDLP backbenchers about what they regard as the absolute necessity of the Council of Ireland with executive functions. They seem to look at it, however, not in terms of the Council for its own sake but in terms of "that's what we negotiated and we're not going to be pushed around by Faulkner". The Council is not a burning issue ^{amongst} ~~among~~ their constituents, who continue to be concerned by internment and by violence, as well as by the conventional problems of jobs, houses and prices. I spent some time with a deputation of about fifteen people who had come from Derry to see Austin Currie about housing repairs, and found their interest in the Council of Ireland minimal. When I pointed out that the Council's role in the police area might help in ending violence I was told very bluntly that Dublin's main role in ending violence should start with rounding up the Provos along the border. As one woman put it, "there is not much point in our having the guts to lock our back doors at night if the boys can hop over the border, not only to safe beds but to a hero's welcome". The feeling of war weariness and complete sickness with violence is stronger than it has ever been. Recent incidents have been particularly horrifying and because they have been more public than anything since the Bloody Friday type car bombings, they have made a dramatic impact. Hundreds of Belfast shoppers saw the brains and blood of the policeman who was shot dead at point blank range, apparently by a boy wearing a school blazer, in a busy shopping area two Saturdays ago. A few days later shoppers again saw the Provos mowing down soldiers from the steps

of St. Mary's Church in the centre of Belfast - a church about which every schoolboy on the Falls knows that it was the first ever Catholic church in Belfast and that on the day of its opening the guard of honour on the steps was drawn from the ranks of the Protestant United Irishmen*. This week hundreds of Protestant dockers and shipyard workers were sickened by the sight of the riddled body of a worker from the Catholic Divis flats fall off the back of an open truck on which he had been travelling home from work with about twenty others, Protestants and Catholics, when a man stepped from a doorway in East Belfast and emptied his machine gun into the truck. Even in hardened Crossmaglen, Paddy O'Hanlon says that the Provos have taken their first major hammering from the community with the death of two schoolboys who were blown to pieces by a booby-trapped van meant for the British army.

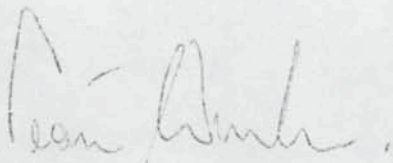
9. An interesting sidelight on the operation of the NI Executive's information machine may be worth recording. There is a feeling, obviously not shared within the SDLP, that the SDLP Ministers are projecting their own achievements so well that their Faulknerite colleagues are being held up to public ridicule in unionist circles. Frank Cooper teased Hume and Currie about this and took the line that "everyone already knows you're better Ministers than Herbie Kirk and Leslie Morrell. You don't have to rub it in." Hume replied by saying that since Faulkner's man headed the information machine, he should be able to correct any imbalance. Cooper's vitriolic reply was along the lines - "Baxter is a decent man but he hasn't had an original idea in ten years and his senior civil servant, Montgomery, is a 100% shit who leaks everything to Paisley. He is in the information Department only because he had to be given a job somewhere and that's where we calculated he would do the least harm."

10. Other points from the various conversations included the following: -

(#02 was it the Dangannon Volunteers?)

- Hume and Currie are furious that Faulkner has not consulted them about the British-Irish approach to the EEC for a joint study of cross-border regional development. They hope to find some way of raising the matter with him without its being too obvious that they are aware of the Dublin-Belfast contacts;
- at least some of the cases involving unacceptable interrogation procedures about which the Minister for Foreign Affairs has been complaining to the British authorities are being investigated in a most acceptable way. J. C. Napier, Solicitor, has, at the request of the RUC, arranged for two of the individuals concerned who are clients of his to be interviewed at his office by a senior RUC officer. Napier sat in on the sessions, both of which he said were thoroughly and fairly conducted, and he says that even if nothing results from the interviews, his clients are now satisfied that someone, somewhere, is on their side;
- it is estimated that at least one-third of the internees released before Christmas have now been re-interred. There has been no howl from the community because it is widely accepted that they were men who not only were back in action but by doing so were reducing the chances of a more generous programme of releases. Morale in Long Kesh is said to be very bad, primarily because the expectations raised by the pre-Christmas releases have been dashed, and the trouble in the camp on 22 March is said to be a symptom of this low morale;
- Frank Cooper continues to make the point to various people - this time it was mentioned to me by Oliver Napier - that Dublin is finding it difficult to make progress in setting up a Police Authority. He points out that though it is over three months since Sunningdale, there is as yet no sign of a Dáil bill on the subject;

- in a general discussion with Ciaran McKeown, he made the interesting point that unionist demands for further action by Dublin on security matters might be satisfied or at least defused by setting up a standing Anglo-Irish Security Commission which would keep the matter under constant review and even deal ad hoc with e.g. the investigation of tricky border incidents such as a Lifford-Strabane shooting. If set up at military level it would have the advantage at best of de-politicising the whole question and at worst of providing both Governments with a body to which awkward queries could be referred.



Seán Donlon

23.3.1974.