

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

### IRELAND



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**Title:** Memorandum written by Conor Cruise O'Brien, Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, calling for a reassessment of Irish Government attitudes towards the Council of Ireland, a modification of the Sunningdale Agreement, and the removal of Articles 2 and 3 from the Irish Constitution.

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Memorandum from Minister for Posts and TelegraphsDate: 20 May 1974

I think we should re-assess our attitude to the Council of Ireland.

Hitherto our attitude has been to build up the Council as much as possible, so that it should look as much as possible like a step on the road to a United Ireland.

As you know I have always believed that policy to be mistaken, because it failed to take adequate account of the views of Ulster Protestants. A Council of Ireland with executive powers and two tiers proved unsaleable to the Faulkner supporters, and rouses extreme Loyalists to hysterical fury. It seems probable that the hideous outrages which occurred here last Friday were one expression of that fury. If so further such deeds and worse would be likely to accompany and follow the setting up of the kind of Council which was provided for at Sunningdale.

This raises a question with terrible implications which must be at the back of all our minds: are our citizens prepared to see their lives, and their families' lives put at grave risk for the sake of a Council of Ireland with executive powers and two tiers?

I would suggest that they are not prepared to accept this risk, and that we ought not ask them to do so.

I do not under-estimate the difficulties that this places us in. The SDLP, who seemed recently prepared to do some very necessary back-tracking on the Council seem to have run into difficulty on this; whether the difficulties are being created by Mr Faulkner's side or by the SDLP back benchers, or both is not quite clear to me. At any rate it seems that at present we cannot expect any breakthrough in that quarter.

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The question is whether we can make any breakthrough ourselves. We certainly must not overlook the political danger that any shift in our position could be interpreted as a capitulation to violence, and also an admission that policies previously pursued by us had helped to create the violence in question. This is a real danger but I suggest that we cannot allow it to outweigh the physical dangers to which we expose our citizens by persevering on the previous lines. People can be asked for sacrifices on behalf of causes to which they are profoundly and passionately committed. I don't believe anyone in this country feels such a commitment to a Council of Ireland with executive powers and two tiers. I also think that only a minority feels such a commitment to the unity on the road to which such a Council is supposed to be a step. The only people who feel passionate commitment about the Council are those who are passionately committed against it and prepared to murder people throughout this Island if it comes into existence.

The more we persevere along this course, and the more success we appear to be having in it the greater the risks of "retaliatory" murders and the more our people will be likely to focus on the Council - and our policy - as being at the root of their troubles. That is to say that if we persevere in this course now we shall only have to abandon it later at terrible cost, both in human and in political terms.

I believe therefore there are very strong grounds for modifying the Sunningdale agreement, reducing the Council of Ireland to the dimensions originally envisaged by Faulkner - i.e. a Council of Ministers without executive powers. One way of making progress is that direction might be to indicate, at an appropriate moment, that we are not putting pressure on anyone in Northern Ireland and that we are prepared to agree to any form of Council on which the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly can agree and also to the principle that any further development of the Assembly can come only through agreement by the Executive or Assembly.

Taoiseach's  
Letter to  
Mr  
Faulkner  
20/6.



I also think that we should take an early occasion - though not the same one - to announce that we will put to the people before the end of the year a new Constitution in which the territorial claims of Articles 2 and 3 will be dropped and an expression of our aspiration towards eventual unity by free consent be substituted. We should try to get Mr Lynch to go along with this but we should do it whether he wants it or not. I have an idea that if the Opposition made us stand against such a Constitution they would be likely to be defeated, and do damage to themselves in the process.