

**NATIONAL ARCHIVES**

**IRELAND**



<b>Reference Code:</b>	2005/4/776
<b>Creation Date(s):</b>	19 August 1974
<b>Extent and medium:</b>	4 pages
<b>Creator(s):</b>	Department of Foreign Affairs
<b>Access Conditions:</b>	Open
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UUUC/Conservative links

only pay lip-service to parliamentary democracy as we understand

On 26 July 1974, 'The Guardian' reported that senior Conservatives had made several approaches to Ulster Unionists at Westminster "over the past few weeks" to find out the terms on which the Unionists would join a coalition after the next election. The Conservative representatives were reportedly told that the minimum terms would include a total commitment to the Union by the Tories and the granting of extra Northern Ireland seats at Westminster, bringing its representation from 12 to at least 20.

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Unionist spokesmen were reported as saying they were certain the approaches had the backing of Mr. Heath and that, if after the next election, Parliament was without a majority party, there was a very real chance of at least a formal pact between the Ulster Unionists and the Tories. They pointed out that with Sunningdale now out of the way and a Constitutional Convention on the way, the only issue standing between the loyalists and the Tories now is that of Northern Ireland representation at Westminster. Unionist spokesmen further point to the fact that after the February General Election, Mr. Heath offered the whip to the seven members of Official Unionist Party who had been returned.

Loyalists. He said Mr. Heath had set Mr. Barry West M.P., leader of

The first public indication from within the Conservative Party that moves of this nature were afoot came in a speech by William Van Straubenzee M.P., former Minister of State for Northern Ireland. Addressing a meeting of the Sannenbergh Association of Great Britain in Surrey, 2 August, he spoke angrily of some Conservatives, "whose good faith I respect but whose judgement is ... faulty" being in touch with "so-called Loyalists who have never had any connection with our party". He went on "those who think like that should reflect on the background of those with whom they now seek to do business. These are not the sort of men with whom a modern Conservative Party should go into alliance. Some at least of them

only pay lip-service to parliamentary democracy as we understand it.... For my part I would rather see the Conservative Party in opposition for 15 years than dependent on the votes and the support of men such as this".

The matter was now out in the open, and immediately the Government mounted an attack. Mr. Robert Mellish, Government Chief Whip challenged Mr. Heath to deny there had been talks involving a deal between the Conservatives and Ulster Unionists. The Prime Minister, Mr. Wilson joined in, accusing the Conservatives of "trying to wriggle out of the bi-partisan approach and do a deal with extremists with whom they would not have been seen dead when they were last in Government."

Mr. Heath remained silent but a leading Conservative backbench advocate of closer links with the UUUC group, Philip Goodhart said that progress had been made in bridging the gap between them and his party. Talks were continuing at backbench and frontbench levels, he said. (IRISH TIMES, 5 August 1974). In a BBC radio interview on 4 August 1974, Mr. Ian Gilmour, Opposition spokesman on Northern Ireland, firmly denied that Mr. Heath had been doing a deal with the Loyalists. He said Mr. Heath had met Mr. Harry West M.P., leader of the largest body of opinion in Northern Ireland, but he had also seen all other leaders of political opinion in the past few weeks. In the last Parliament, at least three of the Ulster Unionists took the Conservative whip and in the present Parliament the party had Ulster Unionist support on some matters. "I very much hope", he said, "that in the next Parliament we will have the support of many of the Ulster Unionists". Asked about the possibility of a split in the Conservatives, Mr. Gilmour replied that "Mr. Heath, Mr. Whitelaw and the rest of the Shadow Cabinet are in entire agreement on Northern Ireland".

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On 5th August, the London "Times" commented thus on Conservative Party moves.

"Behind the scenes, Conservative backbenchers and frontbenchers have made contact with Ulster Unionists since the general election on February 28 produced a minority Labour Government.

Several former Conservative minister, including Mr. Whitelaw and Mr. Pym, who carried responsibility for Northern Ireland, have no especially warm feelings for some members of Mr. West's group in the Commons, But for 50 years there has been a close association between the Conservative Party and the Ulster Unionists at Westminster, and many Conservative backbenchers would regard it as folly for Mr. Heath to surrender the chance of office, if an autumn election produced a close result, by spurning the support of at least some of the Ulster Unionist MPs.

Mr. Goodhart spent two days in Northern Ireland 5-6 August, but did

In fact, Mr. Heath and his party managers see no need for any deal with Mr. West and his group until the result of the next election is known. Since the late 1960s the Ulster Unionists taking the Conservative whip were often more of a hindrance than a help, not least when some of them voted against going into the EEC, and the strain on relations has by no means been completely eased during the five months of the Labour Government.

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Nevertheless, a group of backbenchers, led by Mr. Philip Goodhart joint Secretary of the 1922 Committee, have been at work building a bridge between their frontbenchers and the Ulster Unionist group; and undoubtedly some of them recognize the force of the Ulster Unionists' claim that, if Stormont is suspended and direct rule is to continue indefinitely, Northern Ireland has a right to about 18 to 20 seats in the Commons.

Monday Club view: Mr. John Biggs-Davison, MP for Epping Forest and chairman of the Monday Club and Mr. John de Vere Walker, the Ulster Group chairman, said in a joint statement last night that the Monday Club was no party to the destruction of Stormont and "the abortive bipartisan policy that shattered the Conservative political base in Northern Ireland", the Press Association reports. The club welcomed attempts to revive an effective anti-socialist alliance of British Tories and Ulster Unionists."

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Conservative members had formed a Northern Ireland group in the Commons under the chairmanship of Mr. Philip Goodhart. The group met every Wednesday when Parliament was sitting to discuss matters of interest with Unionists and Mr. Harry West had attended many of the meetings. Robert Fisk (Times, 6 August) reports James Kilfedder M.P. as saying that his party was being wooed by both Tories and Labour. On the evening of 5 August, John Biggs-Davison, speaking on BBC Television, said he thought Mr. Gilmour would welcome the support of Unionist members. "I think he would welcome the support of Ulster Unionist members. The impression I have is that he is more practical than his predecessors".

Mr. Goodhart spent two days in Northern Ireland 5-6 August, but did not meet Mr. West as expected. He was reported as saying that he would still like to see the Official Unionists taking the Conservative Whip after the next election. He was interested in reforging the links between the Conservative Party and the Official Unionists. Creating an alliance with the Vanguard and Democratic Unionists would be "another hurdle to be crossed".

B. M. A. -

19.8.1952