

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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**Title:** Letter from John McColgan, Counsellor, Anglo-Irish Section, Department of Foreign Affairs to Dermot Nally, Assistant Secretary, Department of the Taoiseach, enclosing report of meetings in London with William Craig, Vanguard Unionist Progressive Party and member of United Ulster Unionist Council

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ROINN GNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA  
DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH 2  
DUBLIN 2

SECRET

10 March 1975

*Tasnuairk hl 13/3/75  
2 sent to [unclear] 18/3  
to [unclear]  
12/3*

Dear Dermot

I enclose herewith copy of a report of meetings with  
Mr. William Craig in London.

Yours sincerely

John McColgan

Mr. D. Nally  
Assistant Secretary  
Department of the Taoiseach  
Government Buildings  
Upper Merrion Street  
Dublin 2

Meetings with Mr. William Craig, M.P.  
in London

I visited London on 4th March and had dinner with Mr. William Craig, M.P. in the House of Commons, and spent almost five hours with him. The following day the Minister met Mr. Craig for about three-quarters of an hour in a private room in a hotel in London.

My meeting with Mr. Craig was a very friendly one and he was quite out-going and expansive during our discussion. In the course of the evening when we retired to the bar of the House of Commons after dinner he introduced me to two of his colleagues in the UUUC, Messrs. John Carson and Harold McCusker. In addition, while in Mr. Craig's company I met several Labour Party M.P.s, the Secretary of State, Mr. Merlyn Rees and Gerry Fitt. Mr. Craig also told me that he had mentioned the fact that he was meeting me from time to time in the North of Ireland in confidence to Desmond McCarten, the Lobby correspondent of the Belfast Telegraph. In addition at the end of his meeting with the Minister he indicated that he had informed his Parliamentary colleagues of the fact that he was meeting me from time to time and at one stage during my own conversation he indicated clearly that the sooner that such meetings could take place openly and without any secrecy the happier he would be.

I first raised with him the question of the on-going ceasefire, the IRA incident centres and the policing moves by the UDA. He started off by saying that he fully endorsed Merlyn Rees' handling of the situation. He realised the danger of the incident centres but he thought that the risk which they represented was worth taking if it brought about a permanent peace. He commended Rees for his skill in reaching such a fine balance of calculation in his handling of the matter. He had nothing but the highest of praise for him.

Harry West was generally in agreement with him on this point and the Loyalist reaction, particularly from some members of the UDA had been both excessive and unnecessary. However, the meeting of the para-military representatives with the Secretary of State in Westminster that day and with his colleagues in the UUUC had been a fruitful one and he assured me that UDA policing of Loyalist areas would stop in the next day or two. When I asked him what further developments he would welcome he surprisingly indicated that he would support an immediate withdrawal of troops to barracks as a way of copper-fastening the peace. He has clearly changed his mind somewhat from his attitude of early January in that he now considers that if you can maintain peace for a sufficiently long period, i.e. three or four months, it will make it impossible for the men of violence to ever again resume their campaign on the scale of the past few years.

By and large he was quite confident that the ceasefire was holding and that the Provos were not using the truce to increase their stocks of weapons and explosives. There had been one semi-substantial shipment of arms through Warrenpoint (this was a different one to the one being raised currently by the UDA with Merlyn Rees) and in addition the Provos were strengthening their hold in the Coalisland/Stewartstown area but apart from this isolated part of mid-Ulster he thought they were operating at a very reduced level in the rest of the Province. He recently had visited McGilligan camp and had talked to several Provos there. He was impressed by the fact that they clearly believe the campaign to be at an end. Craig added that they exuded a sense of relief that this was so. He spent a long time questioning me on the intricacies of the Official IRA v. the IRSP conflict and was puzzled in particular by Bernadette McAliskey's involvement in the affair. He obviously knows Mrs. McAliskey quite well and does not regard her as a person of violence or as someone who would allow herself be associated in the long term with groups involved in the type of violence which the IRSP seems to be involved in.

It is also perhaps interesting to note that Craig told me that the Army were annoyed at Rees' handling of the situation and that they had not been much consulted in the discussions leading to the ceasefire. For that reason they tend to be hostile to the idea. From other things he said during the conversation I formed the impression that Craig has a line to a fairly high level in Army intelligence and he seemed to take it as a matter of course that if the Army intelligence had discovered any evidence of Provisional IRA behind-the-scenes operations during the ceasefire he would have been informed of it.

We also discussed the Convention prospects at some length. He is not prepared himself to consider nor does he think there is the remotest possibility that the UUUC as a group will agree to power-sharing. He also sees that the SDLP will probably not agree to anything less and for this reason he thinks the Convention should be wound up by July because it is clearly not going to work and it would be politically dangerous to continue futile discussions indefinitely. It would be far healthier to admit that the Convention formula was not the right one for Ulster at the present time. While this would be his basic position and his assessment of the actual realities of the situation he nevertheless indicated at several points during the discussion that he was disappointed at his own colleagues in the UUUC not being more ready to compromise and find formulas for contact with the minority. He is very much afraid that the UUUC Convention Manifesto will be a very rigid and binding document. He is doing what he can to prevent this and to ensure that the Manifesto gives the representatives at the Convention certain room for manoeuvre, otherwise he sees no hope whatsoever of progress. While being dismissive of the Convention as a vehicle for finding a solution he is not totally dismissive of the whole exercise. The Convention will have one advantage in that it will make it possible for talks to take place between groups who have not been talking together either privately or publicly since 1972. I detected a strong personal desire on Craig's part

to get to grips with the SDLP and I have a clear feeling that he believes in an instinctive rather than a formulated way that he could hammer out some agreement with them. In fact he said that he is pressing very strongly inside the party for some sort of pre-Convention talks with the SDLP.

My own assessment of what Craig envisages at present and this is based not on a clearly stated position by him but on what seemed to me the general tendency of his thinking, is that if the Convention fails he would hold out for continued direct rule on the principle that Northern Ireland has never asked for anything more than to be ruled as the rest of the United Kingdom is ruled. (It is interesting to note in this context that he said quite emphatically that he considers that the SDLP are making a grievous error in tactics at present. They are under the impression that the primary plank of any Loyalist policy will be the restoration of an Ulster Parliament. According to Craig this is just not true. The UUUC would clearly like to have an Ulster Parliament but it is not something to which they are inescapably attached and the SDLP are unwise if they do not see this.) Craig's scenario therefore would be a continued direct rule with Northern Ireland more closely integrated into the United Kingdom at a time when Scotland and Wales were getting a devolved government and greater independence within the United Kingdom. Craig clearly sees the contradiction in this situation. However, I suspect that in the long term that he would see the developments in Scotland and Wales eventually leading the British to restore an Ulster Parliament similar to the old Stormont. While he never quite said this openly it seemed clear from our conversation that Craig may well have something like it in mind and would be working on a time scale of perhaps five years ahead rather than anything more immediate. He sees the initial crunch on this issue coming in November when Westminster will have to decide what in fact they are prepared to give Scotland and Wales and the long term effects of that decision will inevitably influence the final form of government which emerges in Ulster. In the short term Ulster might seem to be integrating into the UK while Scotland and Wales

withdraw from it but in the long term Ulster will end up like Scotland and Wales.

Craig also indicated that he is worried about the plans of the Protestant para-military organisations in the event of a failed Convention. He spoke in terms of not just another UWC strike but something more ominous than that. In addition he said that the UVF are "going funny" at the moment. He also added that Ken Gibson, in his view, no longer spoke for the UVF and as far as he knows he has been isolated and dismissed from the organisation. This is in line with some recent press reports which indicate that the old rivalries between the UDA and the UVF may be on the resurgence again. The recent policing crisis seems to have been engineered by the UDA and the UVF seem to have lost some face in the operation. Craig was also extremely critical of Paisley and said that he was only surviving at present because of the fact that he was linked with the UUUC. A lot of people on the Loyalist side are getting tired of his use of religion in the political sphere and Craig told me that a number of Free Presbyterians have moved over to the Vanguard party. Craig added that in his view "if we must have clergymen in politics in Northern Ireland they should take off their dog collars and become politicians". He also told me that inside Vanguard itself he has considerable difficulties with the Deputy leader of the party, Mr. Ernest Baird, and I gather that he disagrees with the recent letter which Baird sent to the London Times. On the breakdown of seats in the elections, he sees the UUUC taking between 42 and 45 seats. He considers that Faulkner will be doing exceptionally well if he gets 7 seats and that the SDLP may well lose 4 to 5 seats to the Republican Clubs and the Provisionals if they stand. He sees the Republican Clubs taking seats in Armagh, Fermanagh/South Tyrone, mid-Ulster and South Down and the Provos taking a seat in West Belfast.

He also indicated quite clearly that he would like to see some sort of North/South talks starting in the near future. He reckons that he can carry two-thirds of the parliamentary party with him on

this issue and that amongst those moving to support the idea is Harry West. (The possibility of Vanguard amalgamating with the Official Unionist party was also something that he seemed to think a likely development in the near future.) He himself is about to circulate a memo within the UUUC on the idea of North/South talks in an open and public way. While he clearly appreciated the chance of talking to representatives from the South in a discreet way at present he would much prefer if such talks could be held in the open. It is, I think, perhaps a measure of his own strength within the Unionist Coalition that he not only agreed to see the Minister but that he clearly wished to keep his colleagues informed of the fact that he was meeting me on semi-regular basis and even felt free enough to mention the matter to a Belfast journalist. When I asked him what he would see such talks being about he said that primarily they must be about devising a formula for living together. Then they could also explore such areas as agriculture and matters of joint EEC interest.

On the question of present Southern attitudes he was quite openly appreciative of the fact that we were keeping a low profile and also praised our current activities in the security field. He even went so far as to say that if the British were to take a leaf from the Southern book on this question it would help to bring about a solution in the North.

On the question of the EEC referendum he indicated that Jim Callaghan in his view was now quite confident of the British staying in the market and he thinks the public will also vote for this. He himself is a pro-European and indicated that he would be very interested in finding a way out of local Northern Ireland politics by looking for a seat in the European Parliament in due course. He also spoke in terms of hoping that it would be possible for him to visit the Dáil some time and attend Irish rugby matches in Lansdowne Road. In general he clearly now wants a friendly relationship between the North and the South and a return



to the pre-1969 situation in this respect. In the desultory conversations which I had with him and some of the other politicians in the Members' Bar he accepted Gerry Fitt's point that the RUC prior to the establishment of the incident centres were well up the Falls Road and into the Ardoyne but that since the establishment of the centres they have in fact retreated in terms of the area or territory which they are covering. I also raised the question of an independent Northern Ireland with him but he did not seem disposed to talk about it at any length except to remark that it was originally his idea and not John Taylor's.

During his meeting with the Minister, Craig covered a lot of ground which he had already covered with me the night before. He made the following points:

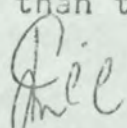
- (1) The role of the para-militaries in Ulster is over and they will become less and less important particularly the large groups such as the UDA and the UVF. In the short term responsible people within both organisations are anxious to weed out the gangster elements in the organisations and in the longer term if peace returns their raison d'etre will disappear;
- (2) He was prepared to give the strongest possible backing to the Secretary of State's policies in the present ceasefire situation. He saw the dangers of the incident centres but felt that with all their inherent risks they were worth trying;
- (3) He does not see the Convention working and said that in so far as he was concerned power-sharing would not even be on the agenda;
- (4) He laid considerable emphasis on the fact that the objections which the UUUC had to the power-sharing Executive were not just because they had been excluded from power but that they considered that a power-sharing form of government was basically inefficient. As an example of this he instanced

their record in the field of Housing, Local Government and Education during the period of their five months in office. He considered that the Executive had performed very poorly in these and other fields;

- (5) If the Convention does not work he would insist that Ulster be ruled as the rest of the United Kingdom. When the Minister pointed out that in a year or two's time you may have five different forms of government within the United Kingdom, viz. the Westminster form, the Welsh form, the Scottish form, the Channel Islands form and the Isle of Man form and that therefore it is not very clear what exactly the Unionists mean by "the same form of government as the rest of the United Kingdom", Craig did not elaborate or clarify what he meant;
- (6) On the question of integration and a situation where there were 20 Ulster M.Ps. at Westminster Craig did not accept the Minister's point that under a Labour Government this might mean SDLP Ministers running the Northern Ireland Office in much the same way as Labour Ministers under a Labour Government are running the present Scottish Office;
- (7) He raised the question of North/South talks and the Minister gave him a long explanation as to what we would see such talks being about and offered to help in any way we could. He agreed generally with the Minister's analysis and added that the question of timing would be critical;
- (8) On the question of the EEC he indicated that the UUUC as a body might have to adopt a position of opposition to the referendum but that they had not yet made up their mind and they were able to remain sitting on the fence because the renegotiating packet had not been finalised. Craig himself is pro-market and also considers that people will vote to stay in;

- (9) In reply to a point from the Minister that he hoped that people in the North had now begun to realise that there had been an important shift in Southern policy on the whole unity question and that it was now accepted by all political parties that unity could only come about by consent and that this attitude should help to diffuse the fears of the Protestant population, Craig said that in saying this the Minister could only speak for his own party. There was still grave fears that things would change if you had a Fianna Fáil Government in office. The Minister replied that Mr. Lynch and Mr. Brugha had indicated clearly that they accepted this position. Craig did not totally accept this and remained convinced that most Protestants would with reason fear the return of a Fianna Fáil Government;
- (10) In this context he raised the question of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution but accepted that a referendum which failed would be worse than no referendum at all;
- (11) Finally, he made the point that the policing issue may be solved if the peace can last for three or four months. He thinks that if the IRA resume their violence again after three or four months peace the Catholic community would start going to the police and shopping the Provos because they would wish the peace to continue. Thus the move towards the police would come in the first instance from the ground up and not vice versa. He has always thought that this was the way the eventual answer to the policing problem had to come.

As I left Mr. Craig down to a taxi after the meeting he remarked that the meeting was in his view an extremely useful first contact. I should add that the conversation took place in a very relaxed and informal atmosphere and Craig clearly wanted nothing more from that meeting than to establish an initial relationship with the Minister.

  
John McColgan

7.3.1975