

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## IRELAND



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**SECRET**

*not any more  
16/4/77  
M/F.A. asked his colleagues to be particularly careful not to mention this meeting to any body because of the necessity to ensure that Airey Neave was shut out about it.  
15/10*

*CS  
6/4*

*Cancelled at today's Govt meeting  
by M/F.A.  
15/10*

Meeting with Mrs. Thatcher  
Thursday, 14th October, 1976

When I arrived Mrs. Thatcher was not present but Maudling and Whitelaw were there. Prior to arrival some discussion started on the subject I had come to discuss. I deliberately did not pursue it very far in her absence but it was clear that both Whitelaw and Maudling were considerably out of touch with the situation.

When Mrs. Thatcher arrived I made reference to the exchange of open letters between Airey Neave and the SDLP saying that in the light of this I thought it might be as well if our meeting were not known publicly lest the two be connected in the public mind. This was agreed. It was evident, however, that Mrs. Thatcher and Maudling knew nothing about the exchange of letters. Whitelaw did know about it. He said that the SDLP had asked some silly questions and had got a perfectly reasonable reply from Airey Neave and he could not see what their complaint was.

I said I thought that while one of their questions was perhaps a silly one, the others were not unreasonable, but it was silly to have posed them in a public correspondence. He assented to this.

I then broached the main topic. I pointed out that the basic strategy of our two Governments since the abolition of Stormont had been to make it clear that there would be no devolution in Northern Ireland without power-sharing and thus to bring about eventually a power-sharing devolved government having the consent of a majority of both sections of the community. We had maintained this strategy successfully on both sides up to fairly recently, apart from the shift in position by our Opposition in the Republic a year ago.

A new situation had, however, now arisen. Before I could proceed to explain this both Margaret Thatcher and Whitelaw challenged me and asked me what on earth I could mean - how could there be any new situation? She asked was I referring to what had happened at their Conference in Brighton. I said 'No', that the problem that had arisen had ante-dated that Conference by

some weeks and it was necessary to explain its genesis. I then went back to the talks between the Official Unionist Party and the SDLP, explaining the circumstances of the breakdown in these talks and the psychological impact this had on the SDLP, not alone in strengthening the more nationalist wing of the Party but also in demoralising considerably the moderate wing of the Party who had been able to do no more than secure by a narrow majority the issue of the challenge to the British Government to clarify its policy before moving on to what the nationalist wing of the Party wished - a demand for a declaration of intent by Britain to withdraw.

I pointed out the dangers of this drift in the SDLP. Should they move to this position, not very different in certain respects from that of the Provisional IRA, and identical with that of the Opposition in the Republic, the position of our Government could be seriously affected given the relatively narrow political balance in the Republic, and the imminence of an election within the next year.

In this situation the whole of our joint Anglo-Irish policy was endangered and it would be necessary to take firm action to restore the situation. Margaret Thatcher and Whitelaw asked what had I in mind?

I said that what was necessary in our view as a minimum was for the British Government and Opposition to re-assert in unequivocal terms their adherence to the policy of no devolution without power-sharing. Such an unequivocal re-assertion could help to steady the SDLP and to strengthen the moderate wing of the Party and restore its morale. It could also have the effect of weakening the intransigent elements on the Loyalist side by depriving them of the hope which they now seemed to have that a change of government in Britain would give them back majority rule.

Whitelaw immediately challenged this, as did Margaret Thatcher, asking how anybody could think that this could happen. Their policy had not changed one iota. I said I could understand that they felt that this was the position but unfortunately it was not seen like that in Ireland, and particularly in Northern Ireland, by the Unionists. Speeches by the Conservative spokesman on Northern Ireland, Airey Neave, had either omitted reference to power-sharing on occasions when such a reference would have been

extremely relevant, or had seemed to modify or water down in some way the commitment to power-sharing. They demurred at this. I said I thought the record supported my statement and I handed over a paper setting out the main elements of all major statements by Airey Neave since his appointment. I said that in any event the problem was not so much whether there had been a shift in policy, or whether Airey Neave had in fact modified or watered down the Conservative Party's policy but was rather the perception of Northern Unionists of Conservative policy. It was quite clear to me that all along the Unionists had hoped there would be a change in the Conservative Party's position. When the Conservatives were in government their hopes in this respect were nil but when the Conservative Party was in opposition they easily convinced themselves that a change of government would give them a way out of the dilemma with which they were faced on this issue of devolved government. I had discussed the matter with Martin Smyth, for example, at several points during the year and he had repeatedly insisted that they were confident that the Conservative policy would change and that in government the Conservatives would restore majority rule. When he had said this to me earlier in the year I had the impression that he was largely whistling in the wind but more recently there seemed to be on his part a real confidence that such a change could occur. Quite apart from my contacts with him all our other information from contacts at other levels indicated that there had been a marked shift in the degree of optimism of the Unionists on this issue during the past three months or so. It was our clear impression that this had influenced them, amongst other factors, into deciding not to bring the talks with the SDLP to a successful conclusion, although this was not of course the precipitating factor in their premature termination which had given rise to the collapse in SDLP morale - this was more probably Harry West's unfortunate statement about the Loyalists lacking the necessary talent to form a government on their own.

It was evident from statements made by Martin Smyth and Harry West to the press after leaving the Brighton Conference, and from a statement by Molyneaux in the papers today, that following the Brighton Conference the Unionists were more convinced than ever that there was a likelihood of a shift in Conservative policy in their favour - one that would lead them back to majority rule.

At this point it seemed to me that the seriousness of the situation and the reality of the Unionist illusions on this matter were impinging on my listeners

although they continued to insist that there had in fact been no change in policy on their part.

I was asked what I thought should be done. I said that two things seemed to me to be possible. First of all, if the British Government, whom we believed were now convinced of the seriousness of the problem, took some opportunity to clarify their commitment to the principle of no devolution without power-sharing, it would be vitally important that the Conservative Party would immediately endorse this statement. Secondly it could be helpful if following that Mrs. Thatcher found an opportunity to make a major speech on Northern Ireland. Mrs. Thatcher said that she had hitherto avoided talking about the political aspects of Northern Ireland but had confined herself to security matters. She said that what impressed her was the sense of fear in which people lived in Northern Ireland and therefore she had stuck to this aspect of the matter. She did not, however, exclude the possibility of making a speech although she of course did not commit herself to do so.

I said that the merit of the action I had suggested was that it would achieve two objectives at the same time - helping to strengthen the moderates in the SDLP and to prevent the slide towards a 'declaration of intent' position, and would also remove the illusion on the Unionist side that by waiting for the Tories to come back into power they could secure majority rule.

Margaret Thatcher said that she could not of course commit herself to any course of action until she had an opportunity to talk to Airey Neave. I said I fully understood this. It was unfortunate that he was not present but it happened that I was in London today for the discussion with Crosland on fisheries and I felt it was very urgent to have contact with her and her colleagues. I had hoped to do so earlier but unfortunately immediately after seeing Roy Mason to discuss the subject three weeks ago I had had to go to the United States for the UN General Assembly and this was the first opportunity I had to seek a meeting with her.

I then said there were one or two other matters I wished to raise. Security co-operation was extremely good between the authorities on both sides. It was now working very effectively and there did not seem to be any problems between us. On the question of security, however, it was perhaps worth commenting that praise from English politicians for the strength of the

measures taken by the Irish authorities was not necessarily helpful. Margaret Thatcher immediately took this point and said she could readily understand this. I said humorously that perhaps if it were possible not to praise us more than twice a week it would help though I did not wish to overstress the importance of the issue. The strength of the support we had from our own people in dealing with the IRA meant that even praise from British politicians wasn't doing us serious harm! She said that she took my point and accepted that praise once a week would be better than praise twice a week!

I went on to say that there was another problem I wanted to raise. Airey Neave in his speeches tended to stress the need for a harder line security approach vis-à-vis the IRA. There were grave dangers here. The peace movement, which was a very important development in our view, had been seriously endangered within the past few days by the high profile adopted by the British Army in parts of Belfast. This problem might perhaps have arisen by chance, because of the behaviour of a particular regiment - although I thought that more than one regiment seemed to be involved. Variations in the quality of the regiments serving in Northern Ireland had all along been a source of some problems to us but generally speaking the profile adopted by the British Army from mid-1974 to mid-1976 had been extremely helpful and had been a major factor in reducing support amongst the minority for the IRA. It was worrying that at this stage there should appear to be a change. It might be that the Army, or some units of it, were reacting to Roy Mason's appointment on the assumption that he would permit or wish to see a higher profile - just as the Army seemed to have reacted in June 1970 to the change to the Tory Government by the curfew and search in the Falls Road even though I was sure that the new British Government at that time had not wished to see a change in the Army's role. There was now considerable urgency about a lowering of the profile of the Army's activities. The situation where housewives could look out of their windows and see British soldiers burning down a community centre and then hear denials from the British Army on the next day that anything of the kind had taken place, followed by an announcement by the British Army on the day after that that seven soldiers had been arrested, was most unhelpful. I felt it was desirable to press this with them because a factor in the Army's reaction could be the constant pressure from Airey Neave on behalf of the Conservative Party for a harder line. We had no inhibitions at all

about being tough with the IRA and getting after all those who needed to be locked up. This was one thing but it was quite a different thing for the Army to get involved in firing rubber bullets, killing or injuring boys of 13 or pregnant women. It was this which had created the problem for the peace movement who had been forced over the last couple of days to issue a series of statements modifying their previous positions, thus weakening their support in both communities.

The peace movement was important because it was clear that even if the British Government and Opposition clarified their position with regard to devolution on the lines that we were suggesting, it would be some time before politicians in Northern Ireland could easily sit down together again to seek a solution and it was desirable the peace movement should be kept going, possibly for as long as 6 months, in order to create the atmosphere in which such a meeting would become possible again.

Margaret Thatcher then asked me why was it that the politicians in Northern Ireland could not reach agreement. In asking the question it became clear that she was considerably confused and thought that the Convention Report involved a proposal for emergency power-sharing for 5 years. Whitelaw and I patiently put her right on this and she then said that she remembered that this had been an initiative of Bill Craig. Even then she still didn't seem to recall the context so that I went back over it and explained precisely what had happened at that time and why the Craig initiative seemed to have failed.

In reply to a question as to why the politicians could not agree, I said I thought the major problem was Paisley. She seemed extremely surprised at this, though Whitelaw assented with my view. I said that while certainly the continued activities of the IRA made it difficult for politicians in Northern Ireland to reach agreement on joint government, this was not in my view the main obstacle to agreement - the main obstacle was Paisley because of his dominant position and because of the fact that he had brought down successive leaders of the Unionist Party who had seemed willing to compromise with the minority. His role in this respect could not be underestimated. We all had made a great mistake in underestimating him at the early stages of his emergence into the limelight. Unfortunately the Unionist majority in Northern Ireland did not have very effective leadership

- partly because for so long ordinary decent Protestants did not get involved in politics in the North which they regarded as a dirty business - this indeed had been the position with most of my own relatives, although some of them had moved into politics in 1969 to support O'Neill. It was this absence of leadership on the Unionist side of a calibre capable of challenging Paisley which made movement towards a solution impossible. The only person who could challenge Paisley effectively was a person who also had a clerical collar - the Rev. Martin Smyth - but when the opportunity had come for this in July last he had flinched at the last moment from what was involved.

In conclusion I renewed the invitation to Mrs. Thatcher to visit Dublin. She said that of course she would very much like to do so but I would understand, being so busy myself, how busy she was and that of course she was in Opposition while we were in Government. It was clear from her reply that she had no intention of making such a visit in the near future.

As I left Whitelaw said to me that as he had been present at our discussion he supposed there was no point in <sup>his</sup> coming to see me at the Embassy afterwards as had been arranged and I immediately agreed with this, saying however that I was very glad that he had been there to hear the discussion and that I knew that he would endeavour to help us with the problem now facing us.