

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2007/111/1998
Creation Date(s):	13 September 1977
Extent and medium:	11 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open
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Visit to Northern Ireland 7 - 8 September

1. I visited Northern Ireland on September 7 and 8 and contacted a number of political figures on the unionist side, including Rev. Martin Smyth, Mr. John Taylor, Mr. William Craig and Mr. John Laird. The following were the principal points which arose in these conversations.

Rev. Martin Smyth

2. I asked the Rev. Martin Smyth for his appraisal of the current situation. He felt there was a considerable improvement in the security situation, although there were still manifestations of gangsterism and vandalism which were disquieting. There was some degree of improvement in the economic situation which should also benefit from the expected upturn in the world economy generally. On the political front he had no doubt that attitudes were hardening. SDLP reaction to the Queen's visit, in particular what he felt to be a snide reaction on the part of Gerry Fitt had been deeply offensive and out of step with public opinion including, he felt, moderate Catholic opinion. This was symptomatic of the regressive tendencies shown by the SDLP on many fronts, and meant that all prospect of power-sharing in the sense envisaged by the SDLP was excluded for the foreseeable future.

see p 8 - Bill of Rights

3. I asked about the talks which the NIO had been organising with political parties on the prospects of some form of advisory forum in Northern Ireland. He said that these were continuing, at least in the sense that tentative arrangements had been made for a meeting with David Forde on that day (8 September) but that the latter had been unable to put together his team and so the meeting had to be postponed. The Rev. Smyth took this as a measure of the feeble interest the NIO attached to these talks at present. From our conversation it was clear that his own attachment to the idea of such a forum remained undiminished but he was altogether less optimistic than he had been in summer. He still felt that the idea would work if the British took their courage in their hands with the support of Dublin but he considered that the SDLP were opposed to the idea as was Harry West. He could not but agree with Molyneux that, if there was no progress on devolution by the end of the year, unionists should turn their attention to the question of integration and ironing out the anomalies of the present system.

4. The conversation turned on the Carter initiative. I asked him whether he had given further thought to the idea of a joint economic promotion mission to the U.S. (on which he had made a statement in response to John Hume). He considered the general idea was a good one but he would envisage a broad-based delegation including industrialists, trade unionists etc. He was inclined to think that the implication that economic

aid would be conditional on a prior political settlement was unfortunate and quoted with approval a statement by Mr. Terry Carlin (ICTU) that economic aid should be seen as a way of bringing about a political settlement rather than vice-versa. I endeavoured to put the Carter statement as a whole in perspective for him particularly in relation to its helpful impact on Irish-American politics.

5. The Rev. Smyth also brought up the question of the future policy of the Government on Northern Ireland. I mentioned the indications of general policy which were available from the 1975 policy statements and more recent press interviews by the Taoiseach. As regards specific issues, I said I felt the Taoiseach would move carefully and deliberately and would wish to take account of all viewpoints. I said the 1975 policy statement had been misrepresented in the press which had presented it merely as a call for withdrawal without taking account of the balance of the statement as a whole. The Rev. Smyth said that even taking this into account the word had a most negative effect on unionist public opinion and could only give assistance to extremist politicians and fuel the fears which helped to recruit Protestant paramilitaries. He felt this view should be emphasised to the Government. He also mentioned the recent statement by the Church of Ireland Bishop of Kilmore, Dr. Moore, on the need to change Constitution, as worthy of consideration. As I had not seen the statement

at the time, I confined myself to saying that I would report this back also.

John Taylor

6. I had lunch with Mr. and Mrs. John Taylor in Hillsboro. He was confirmed in his views that the SDLP were not acceptable political partners by their recent policy shifts. On a personal level he appreciated the ability of people like John Hume and Austin Currie, but the question had to be faced whether it was not better to let the SDLP disintegrate. This was his own view. He accepted my contention that this could only help the IRA and those close to them. On the other hand, he considered that moderate Catholics would go in increasing numbers to the Alliance party and thus strengthen the centre, a trend which he discerned even now. He thought the integrationist school in the Unionist party was in the ascendant. Molyneux's analysis was right. Although he (Taylor) had opposed the Molyneux plan last January, he considered that integration was, regrettably, inevitable. He did not consider that Molyneux's tactical alliance with the Labour party had engendered any serious annoyance on the part of Conservative-orientated unionists. In North/South matters, he envisaged a scenario of deteriorating relations with the Government endorsing the Irish dimension policy of the SDLP, making demands for British withdrawal and failing to appreciate unionist sensitivities. He considered the appointment of Mgr. O'Fiaich to the See of Armagh part of the same pattern and was very critical of the choice. I endeavoured

to put the situation in perspective but got the impression that such a scenario had a certain attraction for him, presumably because he believes that it would further solidify unionist opinion around a hard-line policy.

William Craig

7. Craig agreed that there had been a marked improvement in the security situation, not only in terms of the numbers of arrests but also in relation to the types of arrests - some for crimes of four or five years ago, indicating a particularly deep level of co-operation with the police. He was, however, worried about the possibility of a new outbreak of violence by the Provisionals in autumn. The Protestant paramilitaries were in trouble. The UVF had been virtually eliminated by the RUC and the UDA was, he considered, down to about 1,500 men. The key figure in the organisation was Sam Tweed, who was blackmailing Tyrrie.

8. On the political front, Craig was dismayed by the development of the SDLP. He had not made a statement attacking their recent moves so far but would probably have to do so shortly. Their green policy swelled the chorus of 'I told yo so's' which he had to face from Loyalists. He considered that preparations for his return to the Official Unionist party were well under way and he expected to complete the transition by the end of the year. Vanguard would remain a kind of 'ginger group' within the party. (He mentioned that, to his surprise,

there had been an upsurge of public interest in Vanguard at the constituency level recently).

9. He did not share the opinion of the other unionist figures I met on the growing acceptability of the integration policy. He said West would be seeing Molyneux shortly to admonish him that this policy was not acceptable. He considered that the pact with Labour had caused a lot of resentment in Northern Ireland. Powell was the architect of the policy and this might well cost him his Down nomination next time round. He evinced a grudging respect for Molyneux who was still an officer of the Conservative party, while at the same time maintaining the pact. The Official line was that there was no pact and that the Unionist members retained full liberty to vote whichever way seemed most advantageous to Northern Ireland. The Conservatives were understandably irritated and Neave was to see West about this shortly. Craig maintains his view that the way forward in Northern Ireland is for the British Government to enact a devolution package to be activated only when there was a sufficiently broad based agreement in Northern Ireland to ensure the support of both communities.

10. We had some discussion on Government policy in relation to Northern Ireland. He was encouraged by the fact that the Government continued to wish for a first hand account of Unionist views. He himself had made it clear to West that freedom to keep lines of contact open to Dublin was one of the conditions of his return to the Unionist party. He considered, however, that the policy of demanding British withdrawal, however qualified, would have a very negative effect ("back to square

one, or behind it") on Unionist views. He had sufficient experience as a politician to appreciate that it might not be possible to leave aside that strand of policy immediately, but at a minimum it should be made very clear that this meant withdrawal only when the majority in Northern Ireland wished it. He himself remained a strong advocate of North/South co-operation where it did not infringe on the constitutional question, and considered that the Benelux arrangement might offer an interesting avenue to explore. He hoped that his involvement in the Unionist party might eventually lead to greater flexibility on the policies of the party.

Other Contacts

11. I had a general conversation with John Laird on his views of the present situation. He considered that direct rule was not widely acceptable, certainly to the Unionist-in-the-street, who now began to feel reassured that a British pull-out was not on the cards. The rejection of the UWC strike had given the average unionist the feeling that he could shake off the Protestant paramilitary thugs and the Queen's visit had given him the feeling of comparable liberation vis-a-vis the IRA. He felt the tide was going strongly in an integrationist direction and spoke highly, as he always does, of Molyneux's tactical and strategic skill.

12. Among the other contacts I made was Mr. Brian Garrett, of the NILP. My main purpose in contacting him was to check the situation on the Plant report on human rights. He confirmed that the report had been submitted to the Government. Its broad lines were that a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland alone would meet with serious legal difficulties in a direct rule situation and the recommendation was accordingly for a Bill of Rights for the U.K. as a whole, based on the European Convention. The report does say, however, that if there was to be a return to devolved Government in Northern Ireland, a Bill of Rights should be enacted for Northern Ireland as such. He confirmed that the NIO had tried to influence the report in the direction of finding in favour of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, rather than for the U.K. as a whole, but that this approach had been rejected by the commission.

I sounded out Mr. Garrett and some other NILP people on the rumours, which have been current for some time, that the British Labour party proposes to organise in Northern Ireland. Beyond informal soundings of some trade unionists which appear to have taken place I got no evidence of any substantial move in this direction, at least as far as NILP information went.

General Assessment

13. My contacts did not reveal any new departure in unionist thinking. They confirmed that the debate is still continuing within the unionist camp on the policy required to meet the situation of continuing direct rule. I had the impression that the gap between unionists and the SDLP is at least as wide as it has been at any time.

(Interestingly a number of people mentioned that the so-called "moderates" of the UPNI and Alliance school are now even *more* vehement against the SDLP than the Loyalist hardlines).

14. The debate continues within the Unionist party between those who consider that integration offers the most plausible unionist policy and those who advocate a 'sit-tight' policy in the hope that a collapse of the SDLP or a Conservative Government in Britain will bring devolution on acceptable terms (at most a token Alliance or independent Catholic presence in the Cabinet). There is unlikely to be any abrupt policy move in the party, since its leadership is divided, the Paisleyite game of 'find the lundy' continues unabated, the rank and file are probably reluctant to abandon the idea of a return to Stormont while even a tenuous hope remains and of course the unity of the party is at a premium. The cards however seem stacked in favour of the integrationist school. It includes the Westminster M.P.s and the more sophisticated elements of the party generally and can thus be expected to shape unionist policy in the only political

forum left to unionists and exercise the stronger influence on unionist public opinion. The receding threat of British withdrawal and the improved security situation means that the unionist voter may no longer look on Stormont as the indispensable guarantee of the British link and of good security. Above all, an integrationist policy would provide a plausible policy for unionists, attracting the reassuring hostility of the SDLP while at the same time being uncongenial to Paisleyism. I had the feeling that the Westminster "deal" has pointed up this advantage for many unionists.

15. The Harry West school, in contrast, is composed mainly of hardliners who, on past indications, are precisely those least likely to have the flexibility necessary to promote a devolution package. Craig has so far been the only politician of this group to draw the logical conclusion and his return to the unionist fold will be worth watching since he is likely to be a close ally of West, as well as providing a Westminster and Conservative Party link with the West school. I am inclined to think however that his impact will be lessened by his somewhat maverick record, the anathemas of the Paisleyites and his relatively supplicant position in relation to his East Belfast seat. In the circumstances, it should be sufficient for the integrationists to avoid outraging the sensibilities of the West school,

keep them confused as to actual political manoeuvres and press ahead with an integrationist programme for this latter to win the eventual support of the party as a whole. Such an approach would probably involve a drive on local government structures in the first instance (this could provide common ground for the two schools) with the more directly integrationist question of amending direct rule legislation being kept for a later stage. In the absence of some outside event, such as a heightened prospect of devolution on Unionist terms, I feel this is likely to be the way in which the Unionist party policy is most likely to develop.

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Seán Ó Huiginn

13 September, 1977