

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2008/79/3051
Creation Date(s):	16 February 1978
Extent and medium:	3 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

STATEMENT ON NORTHERN IRELAND POLICY BY FINE GAEL

Fine Gael seeks to bring together the people of Ireland within a political structure that will serve all their interests and needs. This is a primary aim of party policy.

It was with a view to making progress towards this aim that Fine Gael in September 1969 articulated the policy of seeking national unity peacefully and on the basis of the consent of the people of Northern Ireland. It was with a view to establishing peace in Northern Ireland - a necessary precondition to progress in the relationship between North and South - that Fine Gael in that same policy statement of September 1969 proposed the establishment of joint devolved government in Northern Ireland, the concept that later came to be known as power-sharing or partnership in government. These Fine Gael policies of seeking unification by consent and of partnership in devolved government in Northern Ireland were later adopted by other parties in the Republic, by the SDLP and the Alliance Party after their formation, and by the British political parties. They provided the basis for the actions of the National Coalition which during its period in office achieved respect and confidence amongst a wider spectrum of opinion drawn from both sections in Northern Ireland than any previous administration in the Republic.

My own personal commitment to seeking a basis for Irish political unity, deriving in part from my own personal background, is well known. It provided one of the principal inspirations for my entry into politics thirteen years ago. It was reflected in my book "Towards a New Ireland", published six years ago, which sought to analyse the causes of the political division of the country and to look ahead to how this division could be healed. It was reflected also in my efforts to strengthen, or in many cases for the first time to establish, contact with political groups and public opinion in Northern Ireland during my period as Minister for Foreign Affairs - something which I and my Front Bench colleagues have been continuing since the change in government. I have been heartened, since becoming leader of Fine Gael, by the strength and sincerity of the commitment of the party at every level towards this objective. This commitment has been evident at meetings in every part of the country, and in discussions within the Oireachtas Party.

When I visited Northern Ireland in September last I was somewhat encouraged by what at that time seemed to be signs of a willingness on the part of politicians there to seek a partial interim/^{solution} to the problem of devolution pending an eventual development towards partnership in government. Unfortunately, largely because of the way in which the Northern Ireland problem has become involved in British internal politics, these moves seem to have come to nothing, and the political log-jam in the North remains unbroken.

Seeking from the United Kingdom Government a commitment to withdraw from Northern Ireland is not an alternative policy but is rather a substitute for a policy. It has been opposed by the SDLP, who represent the great bulk of the minority in Northern Ireland, for reasons cogently expressed by that Party's Deputy Leader, who has pointed out that the SDLP does not believe that it would leave behind a united and peaceful Ireland, but that there is a serious risk that a significant number of the Unionist population would react violently and that this approach might leave behind a much more divided Ireland.

We agree with this assessment and with the SDLP Deputy Leader's expressed view that no responsible political party could take that approach, which he describes as 'a military demand, not a political demand', and a denial of politics.

It must be asserted unequivocally that to accept the wisdom and good sense of this point of view in present conditions is not the same as either approving Britain's role in Northern Ireland in the past, or envisaging an indefinite continuation of that role in the future. On the contrary the objective of this party is to achieve a solution which will enable the Irish people to govern themselves without any involvement by Great Britain in Irish affairs.

Accepting this thesis we believe that in the circumstances which now exist, with a political stalemate in Northern Ireland, political parties in this part of Ireland have a duty to review their policies, with the aim of seeing what constructive moves might be made by them to help Northern Ireland to break out of this impasse.

This subject was the principal topic discussed at an extended policy-review meeting of the Shadow Cabinet and Spokesmen of the party, held during a week-end in mid-January. Following this meeting a decision was taken by the Shadow Cabinet that a full review of the party's Northern Ireland policy should be prepared and, after discussion within the party, should be published.

This document will analyse the issues involved, review the options, and discuss alternative shapes that an eventual political solution of the Irish problem as a whole might take. Work has now started on its preparation, and has sufficiently revealed the complexity of the problem to make it clear that the task will necessarily take some time.

In the light of prevailing uncertainties and misunderstandings amongst the population of Northern Ireland as to what we in the Republic have in mind when we speak of national unity or unification, and of the evident need - illustrated by repeated calls from Northern Ireland - for such a clarification, Fine Gael feels that it is timely for it to undertake this task. By so doing it will provide a lead to political and public opinion in this island, as it did in other circumstances eight-and-a-half years ago. Because of its tradition of Irish nationalism, which has always viewed the entire Irish people, regardless of their ethnic origins or religious convictions, as equally part of the Irish nation, with equal rights in the shaping of Irish society, Fine Gael believes it is particularly equipped for this role.

16th February, 1978.