

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2008/148/709
Creation Date(s):	November 1978
Extent and medium:	5 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

Note for the Information of the Taoiseach

1. Although the Labour Party commands only 308 seats at Westminster against a current non-government total of 322 seats, Mr. Callaghan won the vote on the Queen's speech on 9 November by a majority of 12 votes. He gained this majority principally through the support of Scottish Labour Party and Plaid Cymru MPs and the abstention of the Official Unionists. While, clearly, Mr. Callaghan cannot be confident of maintaining this effective majority, it is also true that he has no particular reason to anticipate confidence votes during the winter which he would be unable to win. The Welsh and Scottish Nationalists will be anxious not to upset the timetable leading to the devolution referendums on 1 March 1979 and the Ulster Unionists will wish to see the legislation providing for the increase in Northern Ireland representation at Westminster on the statute book before Parliament is dissolved. Accordingly, it is to be anticipated that Mr. Callaghan will be able to choose his own time for dissolution in the spring or early summer. Of course, provided the Prime Minister so wishes and can achieve the necessary support, the current Parliament could in theory continue in being until October of next year.

2. It is not possible to be certain about the outcome of a British general election. The opinion polls in spite of fluctuations have in general shown a Conservative lead in recent months. It is very likely that the expected collapse of the Liberal Party will also benefit the Conservatives. However, Mrs. Thatcher is an electoral liability, particularly in contrast with Mr. Callaghan, and this and the continued divisions within the Conservative Party may have the effect of losing the election for them.

3. Conservative policy on Northern Ireland on matters other than security has been sketchy and ill-thought out. Accordingly, it is likely that the Northern Ireland policy of a future Conservative government will depend on the personality of the Secretary of State. Both Mrs. Thatcher and the shadow Secretary of State, Airey Neave "believe in the union", in her own phrase, but it is not certain that Mr. Neave's health would permit him to take on the job of Secretary of State. The former Conservative junior spokesman on Northern Ireland, John Biggs-Davison voted against Rhodesia sanctions on 10 November and

resigned as spokesman. He has not been replaced.

4. In the event of Labour winning the general election it is possible or even likely that Roy Mason might move to other responsibilities (such as the Home Office). Because of the general uncertainty of the immediate future in British political terms, it is highly unlikely that any major initiative will be attempted by the British Government before a general election. Mr. Mason clearly sees his task as a holding operation, to consolidate the recent improvements in security and if possible to improve the economic situation of Northern Ireland. His "five point plan" of November 1977 remains on the table, but is clearly not acceptable to any of the Northern Ireland political parties. (Its purpose would indeed appear to be more to enable Mr. Mason to answer the criticism that he is doing nothing than to advance political discussion). The main elements in Mr. Mason's plan are:-

- (a) There should be a single Assembly, elected by Proportional Representation.
- (b) That Assembly should exercise real responsibility over a wide range of functions and have a consultative role in legislation.
- (c) The arrangements should be temporary, and envisage progress to full legislative devolution.
- (d) Although temporary, they must be durable, which means that minority interests must be safeguarded and that the Northern Ireland political parties must be prepared to make them work.
- (e) They must make good administrative sense.

5. In spite of the Provisional IRA's renewed bombing campaign in the last two weeks, the major indicators of violence in Northern Ireland for the current year show a continued decline in the overall level of violence. While this is no doubt due at least in part to the successes of the Northern security forces, it also remains true, as is indeed shown by the violence of recent weeks, that the IRA retain the capability to mount fairly large-scale terrorist operations and will continue to do so from time to time, either on their own initiative or when provoked by official statements to the effect that violence has been defeated.

The Protestant paramilitaries have been quiescent in the last year, again partly because of the successes of the security forces but partly because of the concentration of part of their leadership on the political issue of Northern Ireland independence. It is likely however that the Protestant paramilitaries could also launch major campaigns of violence should they so decide.

6. A side-effect of the decline in levels of violence in the North is the virtual cessation of British public statements about deficiencies in security cooperation and propaganda on the extradition issue. It remains the case that no prosecution in the south has been initiated by the British authorities under the Criminal Law (Jurisdiction) Act.

7. It is expected that the Bill to increase Northern Ireland representation at Westminster from 12 to 17 seats will be given a second reading on 28 November. Even if given a quick passage through Parliament, the work of the Boundary Commission in delineating new constituencies will not be completed in time to increase Northern Ireland representation at the next general election. However, the Unionists are most anxious to have the Bill passed into law before dissolution as bringing Northern Ireland representation at Westminster into line with the representation of the rest of the United Kingdom has been an important element in OUP parliamentary strategy since the spring of last year. Gerry Fitt will oppose giving the Bill a second reading and will also attempt to have it amended to provide that voting at Northern Ireland parliamentary elections should be by PR, but he is unlikely to get more than minimal support, from Labour back benchers such as Kevin Mc Namara and from the Liberals.

8. As regards the position of the political parties in Northern Ireland the last test of electoral opinion was the local government elections of May 1977. These confirmed that the scene is now dominated by four parties - West's Official Unionists (28% of 1st preferences) the SDLP (20.5%) the Alliance Party (14.5%) and Paisley's Democratic Unionists (12.7%). Factors such as the break-up of the coalition arrangement between the Official Unionists, Paisleyites and Bairdites, which came about after the abortive Loyalist strike in 1977, and the return of Craig to the Official Unionist fold have further helped to crystallise

the Loyalist camp around the Official Unionists and the Paisleyites. There is considerable rivalry for the Unionist vote between these two groups. Although by size and tradition the Official Unionists are the mainstream Unionist party they are somewhat paralysed by the energetic and aggressive Paisleyite threat from the right. The SDLP, to judge from the attendance at their recent party conference have been successful so far in resisting the erosion of interest caused of direct rule and there is no indication as yet that potential rivals such as Frank MacManus Irish Independence Party (IIP) have had any serious effect on the allegiance of the minority community.

9. In terms of progress towards agreement between the two communities in Northern Ireland there are no indications that the Official Unionists have in any way modified their refusal to share power with the SDLP. If anything their attitude might be said to have hardened since they voted through the Convention Report (1975) which envisaged a return to the Stormont system of majority rule with backbench committees to cater for the minority. In the face of the refusal of the British Government to implement the Convention Report a significant element in the Unionist Party in particular many of the Westminster MP's led by Powell and Molyneux, appear to have quietly adopted a policy of promoting integration with the UK. Their success in obtaining the promise of extra seats for Northern Ireland has enhanced the prestige of this element while those like West and Craig who are partisans of devolution rather than integration are hampered by the fact that they are unwilling or unable to advocate any degree of cooperation with the SDLP to bring about a devolved Government. While some of the "centrist" elements in the Unionist party such as the Rev. Martin Smyth might privately be willing to work towards Mr. Mason's 'five point plan' they have made no serious effort to support it in the face of the disinterest or hostility of the other strands of Unionist opinion, including the Paisleyites, who maintain the demand for a return to the Stormont system. The integrationist and devolutionist groups within the OUP both agree on demanding an increase of power for local representatives either through increasing the power of the present district councils or the creation of an upper tier of local Government.

(an idea which is strongly opposed by both SDLP and Alliance because of their fear of Unionist discrimination in local Government matters). The political energies of unionism at present appear to be devoted mainly to preparations for the Westminster and European elections and to tactical rivalries between the Official Unionists and the Paisleyites.

10. The present SDLP Conference, while it did not strictly speaking represent a totally ~~new~~ ^{new} departure, nevertheless emphasised more strongly than had been the case for some years the desirability of British disengagement as part of an overall political solution to the Northern problem. The Conference called for quadripartite talks after the Westminster elections with a view to finding a permanent solution to the problem and minimising the dangers inherent in British disengagement. The SDLP will be pursuing contacts with the Irish and British Governments and Opposition parties on foot of this resolution. While this emphasis on British disengagement ^{may} ~~they~~ have helped the SDLP leadership to resist a loss of support among the minority Community it has led to further denunciations from the Unionist side and to calls from some Official Unionists for inter-party talks on devolution which would exclude the SDLP.

11. The new SDLP policy emphasis is however more an effect than a cause of lack of progress on devolution Government. The intransigence of the Unionists, the 'war-weariness' of the population in general which means that many, particularly among the Unionist Community welcome a respite from local politics, the degree of reassurance to the majority community provided by Mr. Mason's stance on security and constitutional issues and the prospect of a British general election have all contributed to remove any real impetus from the debate on devolved Government in Northern Ireland, at the very least until after a British general election. While direct rule may have a certain passive acceptance among a large section of the population, if only because it purports to be temporary, there is, however, a widespread feeling particularly on the part of the minority that in the long term such an approach can only further erode the mandate of Northern politicians and increase the degree to which the initiative is left to paramilitary elements.