

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2009/120/2052
Creation Date(s):	25 August 1979
Extent and medium:	4 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open
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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

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PR 27/79

25th August 1979

Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

Mr Atkins's difficult August

Mr Humphrey Atkins MP, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, is probably for us the most important Minister in the British Cabinet, more important even than Lord Carrington, the Foreign Secretary or Sir Geoffrey Howe, the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It is worth noting, therefore, that he has had a bad August and, as a result, a reprimand from his Prime Minister. His stock is low in the Cabinet, and for us this is both bad and good news at the same time.

2. His fall from grace has been caused by an unwise two weeks' absence in Tunisia on vacation in August, followed by some further time at home. He only returned to his office this week, to a loud chorus of mounting disapproval from the conservative press. Before going on leave he and his wife came to dinner in the Embassy and neither of us felt they gave any sign of realisation that August is usually Northern Ireland's most critical season. And so, indeed, it turned out to be. It was during his absence that the U.S. Government suspended the supply of weapons to the R.U.C., a serious snub for the British Government and the Northern Ireland Office. During that period, too, Governor Carey announced his invitations to New York talks on Northern Ireland, based, he said, on a previous conversation in London with Mr Atkins. The Northern Ireland Office here seemed to

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be caught on the wrong foot by the Carey initiative and unsure how to handle it with its worrying implications of "negotiations" - in contrast with our own Government's careful, measured reaction. He was also away for the Apprentice Boys March and the Provos well-publicised show of armed strength in Casement Park on 12th August with its subsequent threat of paramilitary retaliation from the U.D.A. His absence has been roundly condemned by Ian Paisley, Peter Robinson, the Paisleyite MP for Belfast East, and by James Molyneux, the acting leader of the official Unionists. Rumours indicate that the atmosphere in this weeks cabinet meeting with Mrs Thatcher (back from her short holiday in the Hebrides) was unpleasant for Mr Atkins, especially in connection with the handling of the Carey invitation and the exposed position in which the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland found himself. George Gale, writing in the Spectator of 18th August, even raised the possibility of Mr Atkins's dismissal: "But Mrs Thatcher can hardly start reshuffling her men around yet. I have no doubt that she is as appalled as anyone at Mr Atkins's Tunisian holiday, but to dismiss him, as his conduct clearly requires, will be, for her, an admission of error. I suppose he will stay, unless he can be persuaded to plead sickness." This, I feel, is going a bit too far.

3. The bad news in all of this is that since Mr Atkins is under attack he and his Government may try to justify itself by a display of toughness on the North and an increased effort to cater to the views of the Unionists in Northern Ireland. One senses this already, I feel, in the tone of Mr Atkins's letter this week to Governor Carey pointing out that the political future of Northern Ireland was a matter for the British Government, the Parliament at Westminster and the people of the Province. It could not be discussed, said the letter in effect, outside the UK. When I was in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office yesterday I was told that these words were provoked by the Carey initiative and the

way he exploited it but that the British Government were still deeply conscious of our Government's continuing relevance and role. I gather that the British Ambassador in Dublin has been saying much the same thing in the Department yesterday, but, nevertheless, I would sense that Mrs Thatcher is behind the tone and content of the Atkins letter this week.

4. But there is another and more hopeful side to this eventful August. For it has brought out clearly, especially in the handling of the Carey initiative, the lack of coherent British policy and the sense of drift in the Government on Northern Ireland. One feels like asking whether anyone is in charge. In a second article this week (25th August) the Spectator makes this point with startling clarity: "The Cabinet and the Prime Minister cannot avoid their share of blame, for they share in Mr Atkins's irresponsibility. They endorse, by their lack of a sufficient concern, a collective flippancy. They cannot be bothered with Ulster. None of them addresses his mind to the problem. They leave it to Mr Atkins, who goes on holiday. It is a classic example of how the doctrine of Cabinet responsibility allows Cabinet members to be personally irresponsible. Do Cabinet ministers circulate their colleagues with papers on Northern Ireland? They do not. Does Sir Keith Joseph instruct his Centre for Policy Studies to direct its attention to the Irish problem? He does not. Does the Think Tank think about Ulster? It does not." George Gale goes on to say surprisingly: "Northern Ireland is in some respects Britain's Algeria. It was originally colonised by Scottish Presbyterians to suit English interests and the Irish mess is the sour fruit of that colonisation. The present connection between Britain and Northern Ireland is also expensive and debilitating. It would suit the British national interest if the connection could be broken without the letting of blood. The United Kingdom is not well-served by the Ulster 'loyalists', and the 'integrity' of the kingdom is of scant value if one part of the whole is as politically diseased and as unruly as Northern Ireland.

Whether Northern Ireland benefits from the connection, except through subsidies which in any event would be continued, is very doubtful, since it suffers from appalling and endemic violence. As for the British metropolitan mainland, no benefits accrue. Mrs Thatcher starts off with a pretty clean slate, on which nothing much is written, if and when she comes to accept her duty and treats Northern Ireland with the seriousness it deserves but does not usually receive. In effect, an influential Conservative weekly is arguing in London that Mrs Thatcher is now "politically able" to pay attention to Ulster and that a new and clearly-thoughtout political initiative is what we need. It is in that sense that, handled skilfully, Mr Atkins's difficulty could turn out to be our Government's opportunity.

Eamon Kennedy
Eamon Kennedy
Ambassador

c.c. Washington Embassy