

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2009/135/710
Creation Date(s):	9 October 1979
Extent and medium:	8 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.

Meeting between Taoiseach and representatives of the SDLP

1. A private meeting took place on 8 October between the Taoiseach and the Minister and Messrs. John Hume and Séamus Mallon of the SDLP. The Taoiseach gave an outline account of the meeting in London on 5 October at which the Minister and the Minister for Justice had had talks with Mr. Atkins, the N.I. Secretary of State. The Taoiseach mentioned interrogation by RUC officers in the State as having been ruled out and remarked that "hot pursuit", referred to in British newspapers had never been a subject of discussion. Reports that "air corridors" for joint patrolling were on the way he described as exaggerated. Michael Mills's suggestion that we had given security concessions in return for a political price was not correct. The suggestions and requests had been reciprocal. For instance our side had pointed out that there was no effective British Army presence in South Armagh and the British had accepted this.

2. Our delegation, the Taoiseach said, had established that it was committed to the fullest extent to fighting terrorism. The Garda represented the Government in this struggle and army-to-army contact would not be allowed. The atmosphere at the talks on 5 October had been good but there had been no yielding beyond what we thought reasonable. Both on 5 September in Downing Street and at the later meeting it had been decided to observe strict confidentiality about agreed security measures so as to make them more effective.

3. Regarding the political dimension, the Taoiseach said he had stressed that they should look at the causes as well as the effects on 5 September. He had not got very far then. On 5 October there had been a longer conversation on the political question. The impression had as he had mentioned been floated that there had been big concessions counterbalanced by big political advance, but this was not correct. In the communiqué, new language had been used to describe our approach namely that there should be acceptable political institutions "which both sections of the community in Northern Ireland could support and sustain".

(Mr. Hume nodded appreciatively at this.) Our side had pointed

out that partnership was favoured in Ireland, Europe and the USA. The Unionists stood isolated as the only obstacle to that way forward. Mr. Atkins seemed to acknowledge that the principle of partnership and acceptability would guide him.

4. Mr. Hume, referring to Mr. Atkins's activities, said that no proposals had been communicated to the SDLP. He was mystified by Atkins's reference to fruitful progress. He (Hume) had spoken to Fitt. He had had no formal report from Fitt but he gathered that what might be proposed was an Assembly of seventy members to advise Atkins. An argument being advanced was that if nothing were done the political parties would disappear. People had been saying that five years ago. Yet the parties had survived well. The SDLP, Hume thought, was not going to accept just anything now in order to "survive". He felt the report in the Belfast Telegraph (3 October) was probably accurate. Gerry Fitt had said an election was on the way.

5. In this more urgent context, the SDLP was preparing new proposals. A document had been drafted for approval and submission to the annual Conference, after publication. Hume said that Paisley and the SDLP would find it impossible to be in agreement. A total re-examination of the position was needed. Events since the Mountbatten murders had amounted to a de facto admission of the Republic's role in security, therefore the Republic had a definite political role. Both Governments, in fact, had a role in solving the political problem.

6. Agreement, Hume repeated, would not be possible within Northern Ireland. Paisley was strong because the only consistent element in British policy had been and was the guarantee to the unionists. Britain being part of the problem the British and Irish Governments should say that they were maintaining no more guarantees. They should speak only of their aims for reconciliation and peace and for acceptable agreed institutions. Such objectives would be their own "guarantee" to all. On this basis there might be step by step progress. A first step might be administration in N.I. by agreement of some kind.

7. The machinery for progress would be the creation of an Anglo-Irish constitutional commission or conference. This would be an on-going thing. It could put forward projects. It would be in effect a Council of Ireland but without involving Northern Ireland. The animating wish was that London and Dublin would say: "We're going ahead! Northern Ireland may come in any time they like." The SDLP believed that the unionists would come in before long. In 1912 the unionists had threatened to fight and the British Government had got scared. A similar fear of unionist backlash had kept Britain out of Northern Ireland from 1921 to 1969. Look at the cost, said Hume, to Britain and Ireland. Even powersharing in 1974, a positive British initiative, had failed, and Britain would not even now withdraw its "guarantee" - the backlash was still feared.

8. Mr. Hume urged that we should take our stand now. It had he thought been clear over the last month that the active participation of the Republic was required. The new SDLP approach he described as a tough but rational line. Peter Jenkins had at Waterville expressed concern to him that the U.K. Government didn't know what to do. He thought it would be open to a strong line from others for example the Taoiseach. The SDLP constituency representatives and executive council would clear the new document on Wednesday (10 October) and it would then be published. It would get a unanimous vote at the Conference at the beginning of November.

9. The Minister enquired whether Gerry Fitt had any views on the timing of the release of this document. Mr. Mallon replied that there was some difficulty about timing because the Party was in some uncertainty about possible movement by either the Northern Ireland Office or by the Dublin Government. The NIO were saying that Dublin understands what is going on and is in sympathy with the British approach. The Taoiseach commented that Atkins had said on 5 September that his forthcoming political proposal must be acceptable to all parties, and naturally we had endorsed that approach. The Minister indicated that we had kept our distance from the details of any proposals. We continued to state the principle of our involvement. Hume agreed that anything like a joint initiative at this stage would be a disaster. As regards

the ideas leaked last week, the advisory role of a new assembly would be of no interest. Mallon referred to the salaries which were being spoken of for members of the proposed assembly, saying that these would merely confer status without any corresponding function. It would be intolerable in electoral terms for the SDLP to become involved in decisions by the NIO over which they would have no authority. He felt that there was no hope of agreement within Northern Ireland through normal negotiating channels and that therefore they had got to bypass the difficulties. The Minister remarked that Atkins gave the impression that everything was coming along quite nicely and Mr. Hume added that Atkins's assessment seemed to be that if he called an election the SDLP would have to go along. The Taoiseach asked for confirmation that the SDLP paper would be released before there would be any further consultations with the British. It became clear from the reaction of Hume and Mallon that they have not been informed by Fitt in any detail of his discussions with Atkins. Hume said that he had telephoned the NIO to say that he was not aware of any British proposals which amounted to "fruitful" progress, such as Atkins had spoken of at Ballymoney. Mallon said that he understood this was also Fitt's view. Fitt said he had not much to go on and that it was certainly not too attractive. Unionists of his acquaintance said Molyneaux would try the British proposal because it was a further step towards integration. However the OUP felt that if they have to have a vote in competition against the DUP it would have to be for some worthwhile institution. Mallon said he had asked at the NIO where was the Irish dimension in the proposals leaked to the Belfast Telegraph. He had been told to wait until more information became available and his attention had also been drawn to the recent speech at Waterville and the United Nations which, it was suggested to him, showed that that element of Irish Government policy had taken a backseat.

10. The Taoiseach said that our side had taken up the issue every time references were made to the Republic's role. We stressed our interest in and influence on the situation in Northern

Ireland. The British acknowledged this when it suited them. Atkins had reassured us again last week on the matter. The Taoiseach continued that it was the British who said that an Irish dimension was out, not the Government. Had there been a dilution of our insistence upon it? The Taoiseach thought not. The NIO were suggesting that they had got a green light from us for the present Atkins approach. They were trying to capitalise on the Pope's visit and were presenting their package as something nobody could refuse. But if Paisley can refuse it so can we. The Minister commented that Atkins is too preoccupied with Paisley. He had told Atkins that, if Paisley's susceptibility were regarded, there could be no gain for the many people and groups interested in political progress and he meant by this not only those in Ireland but also in the USA and the European Community.

11. The conversation focused again on the talks in London on 5 October. Hume said that they had wondered about the position when they had seen the Irish Press reports of political progress counterbalancing agreement on security. He had therefore telephoned the NIO, as described above, to indicate that he knew nothing of any fruitful political proposals. The Minister said that an objective of Friday's meeting had been to get arguments about border security out of the way. We had told the British exactly what we were doing and had demonstrated that we were not at fault in the security failures which evidently took place on the Northern Ireland side. Mr. Hume asked whether the British were not acting beyond sovereignty in asking for air corridors. The Taoiseach indicated that some permissions had been given for overflights, in particular emergency circumstances but pointed to the obvious reaction on our side of the border if any such concept as an air corridor were to have been agreed to. The Minister confirmed that there had been no good news for us on the political side as a quid pro quo for the balanced agreement reached on security matters. The SDLP representatives noted, with a certain relief, that we had no inside information about the expected British proposal. Mallon commented that neither Cushnahan of the Alliance Party nor Trimble of the OUP knew anything about Napier's and Molyneaux's conversations with Atkins.

12. As a comment on the possible general trend of British Government thinking, Hume pointed to the case of Northern demands for a gas pipeline to be constructed which would bring North Sea gas to the North. There was massive pressure from all sides on the British to concede this. Current gas prices in Northern Ireland were three times those in Britain. Nonetheless the London Government resolutely refused to consider this development. At the worst, they evidently are declining to get more involved in Northern Ireland. Hume went on to comment again on the forthcoming SDLP proposal. They recognised that there was no instant solution but they considered that the proposal would bring about a positive and reasonable position which Mallon described as being an Irish dimension without a Council of Ireland. The Taoiseach said that the proposal would not represent a very great extension of the principle of cooperation with Britain which already existed, e.g. through regular meetings at ministerial and other levels. Any constitutional proposals of that kind coming from himself would be knocked down anyway. The Minister further remarked that since they represented a government they would not be producing a discussion document. They were in the business of governing, not of open discussion. Hume agreed that the Government's chance to get involved would come at a second stage, that of negotiation.

13. The Minister raised the question of current unionist attitudes. The News Letter and Belfast Telegraph seemed recently to show a more balanced view, e.g. at the time of the Pope's visit. Hume thought that the unionists would continue without any constructive political leadership until they were told to get on with things and negotiate with us. The SDLP was proposing means of promoting unity in the hope of bringing unionists to that point. The unionists want power and were beginning to recognise that they would not get it as things were now going. He thought they would oppose the idea of an advisory council and they might possibly jump beyond it to consider an assembly in which they could share more power. Moreover Paisley had never mentioned an advisory assembly. Mallon added that the OUP felt a certain impulse towards accepting an accommodation now on an administrative structure. Local council elections would take place in 18 months

and electoral support was moving towards the DUP. Hume concluded that the two sovereign Governments must take strong action to get things moving but that the Irish Government must have strong political "fireproofing". The Minister explained how we had tried to respond to the electoral situation of British Governments in measuring our message. We now stressed to the Conservative administration that time was pressing, and they appeared to recognise this. However in London they indicated to us that we said too much too predictably about our ultimate aspirations. The Taoiseach added that well-disposed unionists similarly advised us not to talk always about unity. Hume said that the word "powersharing" was also held to be offensive. Then we would be told not to talk about the Pope. Unionist attitudes in this regard would lead one to what the Americans called a "no solution" solution. Mallon said it would not matter how often we defined what we meant by national unity, the reference was always taken amiss. Northern Ireland was the only place where people are against unity. Hume concluded by saying that in the context of these entrenched attitudes Atkins was only pussyfooting with his current ideas. The sort of assembly he was apparently thinking of would be the "biggest quango of the lot." He could not imagine the participants, including the SDLP, being prepared to incur IRA violence for such a puny institution. Security and constitutional questions and all else that matters were excluded from the assembly's competence. The Minister observed that this was why he had not asked in London what was being planned. We should not be seen to cooperate in any way with such ideas.

15. In the course of some final exchanges, Mallon expressed the view that the NIO might move publicly before the SDLP annual Conference on 3 and 4 November. The date of the resumption of the British Parliament, the Taoiseach thought, could be a factor here. Regarding the appointment of Sir M. Oldfield as security supremo, Hume commented that the British invariably made an appointment of this sort when they were about to withdraw from some territory. Hume repeated his view that Mr. Stowe, the new Permanent Secretary at the NIO, was a real politician. The

Minister reported on relevant parts of his conversation with the U.S. Secretary of State, Mr. Vance, notably in regard to RUC arms purchases.

Ammission.
9/10/79