

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2009/135/721
Creation Date(s):	11 April 1979
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.

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

19284

CONFIDENTIAL

Review of Northern Ireland Political Situation

1. A meeting of officials from the Departments of the Taoiseach and Foreign Affairs took place in the Department of the Taoiseach on Monday, 2nd April, 1979. The meeting was convened to review the current political situation in Northern Ireland with particular reference to the forthcoming Westminster General Election, the Taoiseach's meeting with the newly-elected Prime Minister and the visit of the Speaker O'Neill.

Recent Northern Contacts

2. Recent discussions which Department of Foreign Affairs officers had with contacts in Northern Ireland indicated that there were two particular issues which were likely to arise in Northern Ireland in the forthcoming General Election campaign, i.e. Bennett Report and the question of the creation of an upper tier of local government. In relation to the Bennett Report, the brutal behaviour of the police in certain instances was but one aspect of the whole story. There was considerable dissatisfaction in SDLP circles in relation to the length of periods of remand and the operation of the Courts. There was a feeling that the RUC were slow in bringing people to Court and that there was need for considerable improvement in this regard. In addition there was a proposal that the Diplock Courts should have three Judges (as in the case of the Special Criminal Court here). The Northern Ireland Secretary of State had referred to the small number of barristers who are asked to take on the job of defending persons suspected of terrorist offences as one of the reasons for lengthy periods of remand. SDLP sources were adamant that this statement was not correct. Arising from the Bennett Report there was now a call for a review of sentences obtained on the basis of confessions.

Local Government

3. On local government the idea of the establishment of an upper tier on the lines envisaged by the Conservatives was totally unacceptable to the SDLP. Mal-administration in the Unionist-dominated Councils had been proven and any proposal to increase the powers of local councils would be opposed by the SDLP. One of the limited powers which the local councils has in Northern Ireland at present is that of the nomination of representatives to the various area boards (Library, Education, Health and Social Services). As a general rule the Unionist-dominated councils nominate Unionist representatives exclusively. Other councils, which are of course in the minority, ordinarily send forward a balanced team of nominees. The overall result is that the SDLP representation in the case of the local authority nominees to the various statutory boards is very small. This situation puts the SDLP in a difficult position in the context of any proposal to establish an upper tier of local government.

/for appoint-

ment to the various

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

2.

Need for Initiative on Northern Ireland

4. The Department of Foreign Affairs representatives also reported that they had received some expressions of disappointment from SDLP representatives in relation to the Taoiseach's Ard Fheis speech. The SDLP would have wished for a much stronger plea for movement on the part of the British Government. It was necessary now to prepare for the Taoiseach's meeting with the British Prime Minister which would take place as early as practicable after the General Election. There would be considerable expectation in SDLP circles of a move for an initiative by the Government here following the British General Election. It was felt that we would have to 'hit home' on three specific points:-

- (1) our strategy for a solution of the Northern Ireland problem;
- (2) the necessity to remedy the current stalemate situation;
- (3) Conservative emphasis on local government re-organisation: our response.

5. It would be necessary for the Government here to call strongly for an initiative on Northern Ireland after the General Election. In this regard presentation of the Government's case together with the timing of such a call would be very important. Needless to say the outcome of the General Election itself would also be a very relevant factor. It was acknowledged that a favourable response to a renewed call for a declaration of interest in Irish unity by the British Government was not likely to be achieved quickly. Conscious of the SDLP position it was recognised that we would have to concentrate on the need to end the present unsatisfactory stalemate position.

Powersharing

6. In relation to power-sharing it was felt that we should not depart from the principle involved here. Any proposed solution of the Northern Ireland question would have to secure the support of both sections of the community and provide for the participation of their elected leaders in agreed institutions. Northern Ireland was not a normal society and the concept of majority rule was not acceptable there. It was in effect sui-generis. It was felt that we would have to insist on the elements of power-sharing in any interim or indeed long-term solution but that we should not get hung up on structures. If a commission on local government re-organisation were to be established as apparently envisaged by the Conservatives its findings would need to reflect the need for the concept of power-sharing however described.

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

3.

While power-sharing was not being advocated by the SDLP at present the concept was far from dead.

Conservatives' Local Government Proposals

7. Reference was made to the fact that the Conservatives' proposal for a re-organisation of local government had been trimmed somewhat since Mrs. Thatcher's Belfast speech of June 1978. The late Airey Neave had suggested, late last year, that the structure of local government should be the subject of an enquiry which would be established for the purpose of considering how it could be streamlined to fit the Regional Council concept as operated in Britain. The Conservatives have not indicated a return to the old style Unionist dominated local authorities which existed prior to 1973. It was recognised that the Unionists themselves were anxious to get control of the Area Boards and that any extension of the powers of these boards (or the creation of a new tier in the local government structure) would give rise to temptation to abuse such additional powers. A system of local government would need to be devised which would guarantee no abuses. It was suggested that appointments which are currently made by the local councils might be given over to another body (on the lines of our Local Appointments Commission). A move on these lines would cut out the scope for some of the abuses which had occurred to date. The meeting acknowledged that there was a need for additional information and briefing in this area. It was envisaged that the Taoiseach's brief for his meeting with the British Prime Minister would include a comprehensive item on this subject. Reference was also made to the possibility that local government reorganisation could, in effect, through the creation of an upper tier, promote integration.

8. The desirability of an early meeting between representatives of the SDLP and the Taoiseach and other members of the Government was discussed. A particular suggestion was made that there should be an early private meeting with Messrs. Hume and Currie. The Department of the Taoiseach representative undertook to pursue this matter with the Taoiseach.

Meeting with Alliance Party

9. The possibility of a meeting with representatives of the Alliance Party was discussed but it was felt that there would be no advantage in seeking such a meeting prior to the Westminster General Election. It was felt that the possibility of such a meeting taking place after the General Election should be considered in due course.

Taoiseach's visit to London on 10th May (Inner Temple Function)

10. In view of the fact that the British Prime Minister will

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

4.

formally (when the Commons reconvenes)
not be/elected or re-elected until the 9th May/the likelihood of a meeting on the 10th May was very uncertain to say the least. If a meeting took place on that date it is felt that it would most likely be more in the nature of a courtesy call than a substantial meeting. The next occasion on which the Taoiseach would meet the British Prime Minister would be the European Council meeting in Strasbourg on 22 and 23 June. It was felt that a meeting in relation to Northern Ireland matters on the margin of that Council meeting would not be satisfactory. We would of course have to await the outcome of the British General Election before proceeding with arrangements for a meeting with the British Prime Minister. The desirability of holding such a meeting on a date as early as practicable following the General Election was acknowledged.

Security

11. If the Conservative Government were returned at the General Election it is felt that security would be a high priority item with the new administration. The Department of Foreign Affairs officials reported that British Army Press Officers continued to give misleading information on the overall security situation to both Pressmen and M.P.s. The press as a general rule were reasonably well informed about conditions in this regard but it is felt that Conservative Party M.P.s in particular were relying on the British Army sources exclusively for their information on security co-operation etc. If a Conservative administration were returned it would be most desirable to ensure that junior Ministers in particular would not speak out of turn on security matters. It was ^{also} desirable to avoid an "over-kill" in the security sphere. Mrs. Thatcher in the course of her visit to Belfast in June 1978 had stated that there was a need for closer co-operation on security and in addition that the Republic's attitude towards extradition had given cause for anxiety and imposed constraints on the work of the U.K. security forces and Courts. It would be necessary to explain to her, if she were elected Prime Minister, on the occasion of the Taoiseach's ^{meeting} with her, that we were at all times open to suggestions as to ways in which security co-operation might be further improved. It would also be necessary to stress that confidential discussions were essential for success in this regard and that speeches by Ministers critical of the present position would not be the best way to achieve closer co-operation in the security area. A suggestion was made that a note on security co-operation might be forwarded to Mrs. Thatcher (assuming she is elected Prime Minister) at an early date following the General Election.

12. On the Bennett Report the Department of Foreign Affairs representatives reported that the reference to the RUC in the statement issued by the Government Spokesman on the date of

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

5.

publication of the Report had been welcomed in certain circles in Northern Ireland. The view was expressed that we might be more generous to the RUC in any future statement while acknowledging at the same time that there were a small number of "bad eggs" in the force.

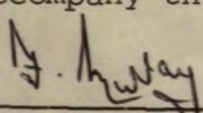
13. Reference was also made to the EEC initiative in relation to the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism. The measure proposed by the Belgians had been open for signature in October last with our concurrence. Since then the Department of Foreign Affairs had been in correspondence with the Department of Justice in regard to the question of Ireland's signature in relation to that document and also the consideration that legislation was needed before the Agreement could be put into effect. The matters outstanding had not been resolved so far. The Department of Foreign Affairs undertook to provide information on this subject.

Economic Co-operation

14. It was agreed that the agreement reached between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister in relation to economic co-operation in September 1977 should be endorsed at the next meeting with the British Prime Minister.

Visit by Speaker O'Neill

15. The Department of Foreign Affairs representatives indicated that the Speaker had been critical of British policy in relation to Northern Ireland to date. In general he followed a patriotic line on Northern Ireland. It was felt that we should listen to what he had to say on our policy with particular reference to its application to the United States. There was a solid basis for our wishing to lobby the Speaker on Northern Ireland having regard to his influence with President Carter and the U.S. administration. It was felt that the Taoiseach should elaborate on our policy for the Speaker. The Taoiseach would require a fairly detailed brief for the visit and material in this connection would be supplied by the Department of Foreign Affairs. It was also agreed that it would be useful to provide the Speaker together with the visiting Congressmen, with briefing material and the Department of Foreign Affairs undertook to follow up this suggestion. It is envisaged that the Taoiseach would meet the Speaker together with the Congressmen accompanying him and that later the Taoiseach would have a private meeting with the Speaker. The session with the Congressmen would take the form of a presentation by the Taoiseach of the Irish position followed by questions from the visiting parliamentarians. The Minister for Foreign Affairs would accompany the Taoiseach at both sessions.


11th April, 1979.