

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2010/53/876
Creation Date(s):	8 December 1980
Extent and medium:	14 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.

Mr. Keenan

Transcript of the Taoiseach's Press Conference following
his meeting with the British Prime Minister, in
Dublin, 8th December, 1980

I.T.N.

Could you try and explain a little more what the Communique means by the phrase Joint Studies covering a range of possible new institutional structures. Is this a reference to some sort of new Irish plan that we have heard about. Is the idea of confederation perhaps being looked at and State Assemblies in Belfast and Dublin. Could you expand on that phrase for us?

Taoiseach

Well the purpose of the Study Group is to find out what sort of institutions might be brought forward to contribute to the purposes outlined in the paragraph. For my part I don't set any limits to what institutional arrangements might be conceived or brought forward as long as they are designed to contribute to the improvement of the relationships between the people of Ireland generally and to bring about peace and reconciliation throughout this island.

Cowan, R.T.E.

Could I ask you in paragraph 7, if this means that you are prepared to give the H-Block issue exclusively to the British Government or continue to attempt to influence their decision?

Taoiseach

No, I am continuing and still very deeply concerned and anxious about the H-Block situation and the British Government fully understand that concern and it is implicit in paragraph 7 that a repetition of my offer to be of any possible assistance, I can at any level to bring forward a solution and I have made that clear to the British Prime Minister and to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. If there is any possible way that the Irish Government can assist in bringing about a solution then we will do so.

Cowan, R.T.E.

Did the British Government indicate that it was prepared to give any further concessions than those indicated by the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister?

Taoiseach

The Communique you have speaks for itself. ~~that~~ We are all convinced that it is on the basis of the humanitarian aspects and the statement by the Secretary of State on the 4th December; that it is along these lines that a solution can be found.

2.

Cowan, R.T.E.

Are both Government's aware that the situation is critical?

Taoiseach

We are both very much aware that the situation is critical and potentially explosive and dangerous.

Duignan, R.T.E.

Did you come any closer to finding the kind of compromise you have suggested after today's meeting?

Taoiseach

I believe that today's meeting has made an important contribution to bringing forward a solution.

Duignan, R.T.E.

Can you tell us what was decided in terms of how a solution can be found?

Taoiseach

Well I have always maintained that a solution can be found along the lines of developing the humanitarian aspects of the prison regime and that was again explicit in the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland statement of December 4th and I believe that the first steps for bringing forward a solution along those lines are improved by the statement of the Prime Minister and myself today.

Duignan, R.T.E.

Does Mrs. Thatcher agree with you that a compromise can be found?

Taoiseach

Mrs. Thatcher, is like myself, very anxious that a solution can be found and I think like myself she will be hopeful that it is found.

Question

Is it your understanding that a search is going on for a possible mediator in Northern Ireland to find a compromise to the H-Blocks issue.

Taoiseach

I am not sure whether a mediator is the appropriate way of developing this situation.

Question from Downtown Radio

Could I ask you what you mean by that. That you are not sure that a mediator is the way to develop the situation.

Taoiseach

Well I think the situation should be developed along the lines of the statement by the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, that is, through the willingness of the

3.

Northern Ireland Secretary of State to discuss the prison regime with anyone who shares his concern about it and it is in that way that a solution can be brought forward.

Question

Taoiseach, could I ask you, it has been suggested that the prisoners inside want their colleagues, their inmates in fact, to negotiate any future development within the prison was that discussed today?

Taoiseach

I don't understand the question.

Question

Well they want the prisoners to negotiate with the British Government - the inmates want their own people to negotiate - was that discussed today?

Taoiseach

No.

Raymond Smith

Taoiseach, in relation to paragraph 6, the Communique mentions the "totality of relationships within these islands" and then you go on to talk about the joint studies, is it true to say that these put an emphasis on the SDLP approach that we are getting away from a power sharing regime within the North and your approach is now as distinctly.....

(tape indistinct)

perhaps it has already been asked, a federal solution but that you are going away from the power sharing solution as a road to some kind of federal solution.

Taoiseach

What is your question?

Question

Well I am asking you have you gone away from the power sharing

Taoiseach

You seem to me to be making a number of statements but perhaps we could have a question.

Question

Well I was trying to put the question in perspective. The question simply and bluntly then is this - has the Irish Government ditched a power sharing solution in advance of any other type of solution being a federal or a united Ireland, that is simply and bluntly the question if you want it put that way?

Taoiseach

The Irish Government is not ditching any possible proposal or suggestion that might be considered as a solution to the Northern Ireland problem.

Question

Taoiseach does this mean that Mrs. Thatcher has accepted that there must be a relationship of substance in any new settlement for Northern Ireland that it is no longer just an internal problem?

Taoiseach

I think the Communique clearly indicates that it's through the development of a better relationship between the two Governments that a solution will emerge.

Question

Are you now thinking in terms of a new friendship treaty, a friendship arrangement with the British Government?

Taoiseach

That is something which could possibly emerge from the joint studies.

Cowan, R.T.E.

Taoiseach you have indicated that you want to see the problem of Northern Ireland raised to an inter-Governmental level on a bi-partisan approach as it were between London and Dublin. Has this meeting gone any way towards achieving any progress along those lines?

Taoiseach

I think that is inherent in the Communique.

Cowan, R.T.E.

Could you indicate what progress you feel has been made?

Taoiseach

Well the commissioning of joint studies, the special consideration of these joint studies at a further meeting. All this indicates that the concept of bringing forward a solution through Government to Government co-operation.

Cowan, R.T.E.

Do you feel that the failure as you have said of the Atkins Conference indicates that the politicians in Northern Ireland no longer have a part to play in the search for that solution.

Taoiseach

Oh I don't think so no. I think that the public representatives, political representatives in Northern Ireland can have a very important part to play at any stage of the bringing forward of a solution.

5.

Cowan, R.T.E.

So how will the machinery work as you see it, Taoiseach. Do you see the British and Irish Government's arriving at a solution and presenting it as a fait accompli to the Northern Ireland representatives?

Taoiseach

Well I don't want to go too far ahead. Sufficient for the day is the achievement thereof. The procedures, what was brought forward today is the concept of special studies - joint studies and, I emphasise that they are joint studies, which will then be considered specially at a meeting in London. I regard that as very considerable progress, historic progress.

Chris Glennon

What type of policies will you actually consider in these studies?

Taoiseach

As elaborated there in the Communique possible new institutional structures, citizenship rights, security matters, economic co-operation and measures to encourage mutual understanding.

Chris Glennon

Last May you indicated to Mrs. Thatcher that voting rights would be given to British citizens living in Ireland. Has there been no progress on that?

Taoiseach

For our part we have concluded our legal examination of that matter and we are ready now to bring forward the specific proposals but they may have to wait until the British Nationality Bill is brought forward and the concept of British citizen defined in that legislation.

Question

It is four days since the Atkins statement and nothing seems to have happened. Do you think we will have another four days left?

Taoiseach

I don't want to speculate on that nor do I wish to speculate that nothing has happened.

Question

Has something happened that we don't know about?

Taoiseach

I have nothing to say about that

Cowan, R.T.E.

So something may have happened in fact that we don't know about?

Taoiseach

I think that is very likely, yes.

6.

Question

Would you hope that the situation could be resolved within the next 48 hours?

Taoiseach

I wouldn't intend to make such an optimistic forecast, but as I have said already I think that the situation must be helped forward by this statement in the Communique today.

Mary Holland

Could you tell us who will take part in the joint studies and will they be British and Irish Civil Servants, will there be persons from the North or will there be politicians? What form will the joint commissions actually take?

Taoiseach

I don't want to go into the details of them but they will be official studies, joint studies, carried out between the two Governments.

Mary Holland

Will they include personnel from the North?

Taoiseach

That is a possibility, yes.

John Bowman

On the same point Taoiseach, that paragraph on joint studies, there seems to be some words deleted from the Communique at that point.

Taoiseach

The Communique is as you have it before you. Communique's are drafted and drafted and drafted but the Communique is now as you have it before you.

Question

There was a late change, was there?

Taoiseach

The Communique has been changed and drafted several times here in the course of the day.

Question

Mr. Haughey, when you met Mrs. Thatcher in London, you had a private meeting with her, did you have a private meeting today?

Taoiseach

Yes we had a tete-a-tete.

Question

Just you and her present.

Taoiseach

Yes.

Question

How long did that go on for?

Taoiseach

An hour and a quarter - an hour and twenty minutes roughly.

Question

Mr. Haughey, could you say how long you spent discussing the H-Block situation?

Taoiseach

The discussion between Mrs. Thatcher and myself was confidential.

Cowan, R.T.E.

Taoiseach, could I ask you if today is the last contribution which your Government will be making to the H-Block controversy or do you feel that you have a further role to play ?

Taoiseach

I would not like to think that we are in any way withdrawing from the situation. I want to say that we are still there, concerned, anxious to secure a solution and are prepared to play any constructive part we can in bringing forward a solution if at any moment it seems that we could do something worthwhile, useful and constructive to help in bringing forward a solution.

Cowan, R.T.E.

Would you seem to be implying Taoiseach, that you have simply left it for the British Government (interruptions) ?

Taoiseach

I have answered that question before. No, that is simply not so. In paragraph 7 here it refers to the statement I made on the 4th December and in that statement I specifically offered the good offices of the Irish Government to help in bringing forward a solution in any way possible.

Cowan, R.T.E.

Have those good offices been accepted by the British Government?

Taoiseach

The British Government are quite anxious that we should be ready to contribute at any time to find a solution.

Cowan, R.T.E.

proposition
You have no indication of what/they might expect from you or what contribution you might make.

Taoiseach

It is a very sensitive and delicate situation, an explosive situation and it is not possible to say how one might contribute but I think the important thing is to have the wish and the will to help.

Radio na Gaeltachta

An bhfuil tú sasta leis an cruinniú a bhí agat le Mrs. Thatcher.

Taoiseach

O bhí mé an-shásta ar fad.

Radio na Gaeltachta

An bhfuil tú sasta le gach rud atá sa Communique sin?

Taoiseach

Ní bheadh sé sa Communique sin mura mbéinn sásta leis.

Chris Glennon

Taoiseach these new joint studies are they to be on some kind of a higher plane than Inter-Departmental and Inter-Governmental studies than we have had in the past?

Taoiseach

K

Yes, these are new studies on a different plane than anything that has gone on so far.

Question

Taoiseach can you give us any indication as to the mood of the parties during the talks today?

Taoiseach

Well the last sentence in paragraph 8 indicates that they were extremely constructive and we regard them as very significant and I am happy to say that the discussions were conducted on an entirely constructive atmosphere

Question

There was a suggestion that the talks may have been breaking up at one stage.

Taoiseach

There was no question whatsoever of that. I don't know where that emerged from. It is absolutely totally without foundation. The conversation flowed right through from beginning to end in a totally constructive sensible manner.

Michael Mills

Taoiseach could I ask you when you speak of possible new institutional structures, what have you in mind, are you talking about new institutional structures covering Irish-British relationships or new institutional structures within Northern Ireland or a combination of both?

Taoiseach

Both are possible yes. We set no limit on what institutions might be brought forward, might be considered, might be designed, might be conceived as long as they seem to be able to contribute to the objectives set out in the paragraph.

X

Michael Mills

Will the proposals on the new institutions when they come forward be followed by a Conference of the British and Irish Governments and possibly public representatives from Northern Ireland?

Taoiseach

It will be brought forward for special consideration at a meeting in London which will consider it and beyond that I am not in a position to say.

Michael Mills

Does that mean then Taoiseach that these studies will be finished in time for your next meeting with Mrs. Thatcher?

Taoiseach

That is the intention.

Michael Mills

Will that be before next June?

Taoiseach

There again, I cannot speculate on that.

Question

Will it be before the next election, Mr. Haughey?

Taoiseach

Which election are you talking about? Well, it could be yes. I thought you might be for a moment referring to an election in Northern Ireland. This process will follow its own guidelines, the process of a general election here is entirely a different matter.

Question

In your first reply you seemed to suggest that your election will be within six months?

Taoiseach

If I made such a remark I now totally disassociate myself from it.

Question

After six months, will it?

Taoiseach

If I made any remarks that there will be a General Election here within the next six months I totally disassociate myself from it. I didn't mean to say it and I am not saying it.

Question

On the question of Citizens Rights, did you discuss the question of people in Northern Ireland having a dual passport - having a British passport if they want to or having an Irish passport. Did that come up again?

Taoiseach

No, but that is something that could be the subject of a joint study.

Question

Would you be in favour of that particular proposal?

Taoiseach

I do not want to pre-empt the joint study.

Downtown Radio

Was the British guarantee to the Unionists discussed in any detail and did Mrs. Thatcher elaborate on her feelings about this guarantee at all?

Taoiseach

Sorry to have to say again but what Mrs. Thatcher and I said to each other is totally confidential.

Question

But the last time you spoke, Mr. Haughey the Atkins initiative was going on in May

but that has failed completely. Do you feel that Mrs. Thatcher now recognises what you were saying that a solution within the structure of Northern Ireland only was not possible?

Taoiseach

I am sorry but that question would have to be directed to Mrs. Thatcher herself. I can only speak for my views on this.

Question

Taoiseach your concluding paragraph says that both sides regarded the talks as constructive and significant, for the benefit of our viewers who are not aware of the complexities of Communiques, could you sum up for us what you feel the most significant elements in today's talks have been?

Taoiseach

In my view the most significant element was the decision to commission joint studies on the various areas and the decision to give them special consideration at a further meeting in London.

Question

Taoiseach you said that you are prepared to help in any way possible in the H-Block issue, also that the use of a mediator.....
.....

Taoiseach

I would like to elaborate on that. I would not totally dismiss the idea of a mediator; it is just my own personal opinion and that it perhaps would not be appropriate

Question

Could you tell us in what way you could be of assistance in the H-Block issue?

Taoiseach

In what way I could be of assistance?

Question

Yes. You yourself.

Taoiseach

In so far as the authority of the Irish Government is concerned, I would like to reiterate that everybody concerned wants to see the vital necessity to bring forward a solution to avoid the awful consequences that could conceivably follow if the situation is allowed to continue and I would like to impress on everybody concerned the desirability, the essentiality of finding a solution along the lines of the willingness indicated by the joint Communique and the Secretary of State.

Question

The Secretary of State has ruled out talking to the National H-Block Committee. This doesn't seem to leave too many people.

Taoiseach

I am not in a position to comment on that.

John Bowman

Taoiseach, you talk about a unique relationship between the two countries and you say you have an open mind about that relationship. Would in the long term you exclude the possibility of a united Ireland having some association with the Commonwealth?

Taoiseach

I don't think that the Commonwealth is a live issue at all in this context.

Olivia O'Leary

Mr. Haughey, you say in this Communique that you agree that further improvements in the security and other fields should be pursued. Can you tell us what improvements in the security field you feel should be pursued?

Taoiseach

Well again I don't want to pre-empt the joint studies but I think the security of the people of these islands is of paramount importance and that the joint studies will devote itself to that overall question.

Olivia O'Leary

Did Mrs. Thatcher express or did the British express any dissatisfaction with the security measures as they stand.

Taoiseach

No talk of this.
have

Question

Mr. Haughey you used the word earlier when talking about paragraph 6 that it was a rather historic conference today. Are we right in summing up to say that you mean by using the word historic that there was a significant breakthrough today in a sense that the British and Irish Governments will solve it, move towards a solution after the joint studies have been presented. Are we today making a historic breakthrough?

Taoiseach

I would be hopeful that we are and I would accept the statement that the problem is now firmly on a new plane for discussions between the British and Irish Governments.

Question

Taoiseach do you think that from the personal chemistry which exists between Mrs. Thatcher and yourself today, do you feel that she has got a real grasp of the problems regarding the H-Block situation because it has often been suggested that one of the problems with Anglo-Irish relations is that there is not a deep awareness of the sensitive nature of the problem and especially among Tory politicians. Do you think that Mrs. Thatcher fully understands the situation?

Taoiseach

I certainly am satisfied that Mrs. Thatcher has a full grasp and understanding of the situation. Perhaps I might refer to the Communique again where it mentions that we have got to bring forward positive proposals for better mutual understanding. I think that is very important. I think in that area of mutual understanding between the peoples of the two islands there is great scope for co-operation and development.

Question

Are you happy with Mrs. Thatcher's level of understanding?

Taoiseach

Yes.

Question

Taoiseach could I ask you do you think that the Loyalists in Northern Ireland have any reason to be concerned as a result of what happened here in Dublin today?

Taoiseach

Certainly not. No. I hope that they will accept that we are primarily concerned with securing peace, reconciliation and promoting the general welfare of the people of all this island and as I said in my Ard Fheis speech I attach a very special priority, to the safety and security of the people of Northern Ireland and particularly the Unionist section of that community.

Question

Could I ask you a supplementary question does that mean that you will be making changes in the law here to try and accommodate those people in the North.

Taoiseach

That is something that could emerge in the future arising out of these studies.

Cowan, R.T.E.

Taoiseach it was suggested in some of the more colourful Sunday papers that Mrs. Thatcher was coming here to tell you to mind your own business about Northern Ireland. I am sure she would not use such unparliamentary language but did you get the impression that that was her view that Northern

13,

Ireland was an internal British problem.

Taoiseach

I think that that is entirely inconsistent with this Communique.

Question

That view was not expressed by any of the British delegation.

Taoiseach

No.

Mary Holland

Taoiseach I wonder if you put any time scale on these joint studies and when might you hope that they will be ready.

Taoiseach

We will be pressing forward with them as rapidly as possible but then they are very detailed and complex issue and I wouldn't like to set a time scale but we can be looking forward to a meeting in the coming year.

Mary Holland

[Request to comment on Lord Carrington.]

Taoiseach

Lord Carrington is a statesmen of the first calibre and I always find at any meeting which I have been at which he has been present that his contributions are always valuable and incisive. He touches no Conference that he does not adorn.

Mary Holland

I am sure that you have the highest regard and indeed I am sure that it is mutual. I wonder if you would like to tell us how he adorned it precisely? (interruptions)

Taoiseach

I will leave you with the Communique.

Question

Taoiseach can you tell us if the Chancellor and our Finance Minister apart from discussing EMS and economic matters contributed to the discussion on the North and in what way?

Taoiseach

Yes. We all participated. We were three from our side and four from the British side and we all fully participated throughout the day at every level.

Question

Were there any discussions about joint financial aid proposals?

Taniseach

Oh there were indeed both the Minister for Finance here and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and their officials had very informative discussions about the present state of the financial world in relation to all matters of mutual interest.

John Bowman

You said that you think that today's meeting was historic and that progress has been made; would you say that the failure of the Atkins initiative makes London look to some extent more at Dublin for a middle term solution?

Taoiseach

I would prefer not to comment on that. I just take today's meeting on its own merits as a very successful meeting, a significant meeting, a constructive meeting, a meeting which in my view has brought very considerable political movement, forward political movement into this type of situation of Northern Ireland.

John Bowman

When you say you have commissioned joint studies, does the verb commission imply there are outsiders involved?

Taoiseach

No, these will be official studies.

Question

People drawn from within the Civil Service and outside?

Taoiseach

I don't rule out expert guidance from outside.

Question

Some of the best experts say that the Northern Ireland problem is one there is no solution to. Would you like to comment?

Taoiseach

I would totally disown any such proposition. I believe that the Northern Ireland situation can be solved and will be solved and I believe we have taken a major step in that direction today.

----- E N D -----