

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2011/127/1009
Creation Date(s):	18 November 1981
Extent and medium:	5 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
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for 518650
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15.1.82

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Contradictions in the Present Situation

The present political situation in Northern Ireland seems to me to be bedevilled by an almost unravellable tangle of distortions and contradictions of role and purpose on the part of several of the principal protagonists. As hysteria and violence mount, the distortions are compounded; what is worse, the two phenomena feed destructively on each other.

The task of removing the misconceptions or, in other words, of confronting the distortions which are the instruments being used by some of the protagonists to heighten tension and violence, has not yet been adequately undertaken by either of the Governments. Both have hitherto been preoccupied with preparing the Anglo-Irish Summit and attempting to contain the dangerous instability of the past week. It occurs to me that the need to tackle this problem could furnish a theme for the Taoiseach's speech to the B.I.A next week.

This brief paper merely notes some of the outstanding contradictions. Its language and perceptions could clearly not be used in a public statement without modification.

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1. The Anglo-Irish Institutional Approach

The original concept (reconfirmed in John Hume's speech of Saturday last) was to devise an institutional arrangement aimed at bringing Northern Unionists into a process of dialogue. Far from advancing nationalist ambitions, it can be strongly argued that the process would in practice:

- erode the existing Irish nationalist acquis, through involving this State for the first time in an intimate bilateral institutional relationship with Britain;
- reverse the strategic priority of a generation of Irish policy vis-a-vis Britain, i.e. the progressive development of sovereignty and independence and the progressive dilution of the claustrophobic and dependent Anglo-Irish relationship in the larger multilateral theatre of the Community;
- formally consolidate Northern Ireland within the U.K., through its involvement in the dialogue exclusively as a constituent of the U.K. side;
- politically reinforce the British identity of Northern Unionists through formalising their contact with the South through a London-Dublin framework.

This formidable (in our terms) price was to be paid primarily to entice Unionists into a process of dialogue.

What has happened?

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2. In the South:

The original objectives of the policy have become inverted in the public political debate. From a system of confidence building measures aimed at Unionists and which would yield no advance in the nationalist agenda, the Anglo-Irish approach has now become an area of political contest in Dublin in terms of nationalist achievement. The success or failure of the recent Downing Street talks, inasmuch as they involved the Anglo-Irish institutional strategy initiated last December, was debated as though the object of the strategy had been to advance classical nationalist objectives e.g. there was criticism from a nationalist perspective of the fact that no decision was taken to establish a parliamentary institution, an institution which in its original conception had been intended to promote Unionist confidence rather than nationalist targets.

The fundamental distortion involved is regrettable, because

- competition here to promote this policy as though it were generating inroads into British and Unionist resistance to Irish unity, when in fact the intrinsic object of such competition would be to move institutionally closer to Britain, might in practice damage the existing achievements of Irish nationalism; and
- The inverted assumptions of the debate feed the equally absurd fears of Unionists and play straight into the hands of Paisley and indirectly those of the Provisional IRA.

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2. In the North:

There is a mirrored political contest taking place based on precisely the same inverted assumptions. The contestants there are the Official Unionists and the D.U.P., vying with each other in their condemnations of the Anglo-Irish institutional approach on the grounds of its alleged erosion of the Union, when in reality the only constitutional sovereignty it threatens is our own.

3. The hysteria of the Northern Unionist debate has been compounded by the murder of Bradford. The D.U.P. and to an extent the Official Unionists now hold that progress on the Anglo-Irish level has encouraged the Provisional I.R.A. in its attacks on Protestants. The reality of course, is that the IRA's objective in killing Bradford and members of the UDR and RUC was precisely to stop what they sense is political progress/^{both} on the Anglo-Irish level and probably also arising from our constitutional review. Their strategy is clear: create Protestant hysteria in Northern Ireland (in this they have been successful so far), frighten the British off the political path and onto a policy of

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repressive security: thereby (1) recreating the role of the Provisionals as the "protectors" of the minority and (2) precluding peaceful political progress and (3) progressively weakening Britain's will to remain in Northern Ireland.

3. This clarity of purpose would seem to be matched only by Paisley whose distortions , threats and actions (particularly in recent days) confirm that he is working for two objectives, both of which are, at least temporarily, prospering:
- (1) The upstaging of the Unionist politicians to a point where they will have no alternative to accepting his leadership and
 - (2) The active alienation of British opinion and leadership from their commitment to Unionism/Loyalism.

M. Lillis.
18th November, 1981.

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