

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## IRELAND



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*Assembly Elect. file* 5/18/1/5  
17 Grosvenor Place  
SW1X 7HR

AMBASÁD NA hÉIREANN, LONDAIN.



IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

28 October 1982

*Mr. Sheridan*

Dear Margaret

I had dinner last night with Brian Mawhinney in the course of which we discussed the situation which has arisen following the Assembly elections. You will be aware that Dr. Mawhinney is co-secretary of the Conservative back-bench committee on Northern Ireland, and is generally regarded as part-author of the rolling devolution system enshrined in the Prior legislation. The set back to his hopes for progress on the latter is likely account for the sternness of much of his remarks.

He took as his starting point in analysing the election results the SDLP decision not to contest last year's by-elections in Fermanagh-South Tyrone. He said that this was now widely seen as a fateful mistake, which had allowed Provisional Sinn Féin to reap a windfall propaganda success, and to lay the groundwork for their victories last week. I responded that many saw in the results the very consequences of the inflexible handling of the hunger strike of which we and others had warned. Mawhinney claimed that the drift in policy which had characterised the SDLP over the past 12 to 18 months, allied with an excessively close relationship with the Irish Government, had done little to serve the real interests of the people of Northern Ireland, or even of their own nationalist community. It was not surprising therefore that, if all the Catholic community was being offered were simplistic policies of non-involvement, many of them should opt to support the party which had the more thorough-going record in this regard.

He recalled that before he had written the seminal article on rolling devolution for the Guardian, he had discussed the concept with among others Seamus Mallon, who had indicated that the SDLP would have no objection in principle to the formula. The Act

as passed, with its provisions for a minimum 70% agreement needed for devolution, and the requirement of cross-community support, was, he claimed, an unparalleled legislative recognition of the existence of two distinct political communities in Northern Ireland.

He had heard, and I repeated, the arguments as to why the SDLP could not now play its part, but he did not find them convincing, in the sense that they were built on premises which simply ignored the North's political realities. There was no reason in logic why the SDLP could not take part in the first phase of the Assembly, without doing the slightest violence to their principles as regards participation in an executive, or their commitment to an Irish dimension. The legislation provided them with an effective veto on further progress pending agreement on arrangements satisfactory to them. Equally he must say that there was no reason why the Assembly could not now begin to discharge its monitoring function, despite the refusal of the SDLP to take their seats.

In the course of our conversation he made quite clear his belief that at least some of the responsibility for the "unhelpful" attitude taken by the SDLP in recent months could be laid at the door of the present Irish Government. He claimed that, for reasons of party politics, the Government had undermined the willingness of the SDLP to work within the political realities of Northern Ireland. As regards the Anglo-Irish dimension, the public posture which we had adopted vis-a-vis the British Government, whether in terms of its Northern Ireland policy, or in the discussions at the United Nations during the Falklands crisis, did not square easily with the much-vaunted unique relationship; our concept of which seemed to be a somewhat unbalanced one.

He said that in making these comments he did so as someone who, unlike some of his party colleagues, did actually believe in recognising the "Irish dimension", and who accepted the need on the part of the British Government to take account of the two conflicting national allegiances within the North. He had spoken in Belfast in these terms only last week (report said to be in Irish News which we have not yet to hand). When I put it to him that the Assembly was foredoomed precisely because it failed to follow the logic of that diagnosis, his response was that there was nothing in the legislation which precluded the advancement of nationalist aims.

I said that this was hardly sufficient; what was needed was a willingness to tackle for the first time the fundamental issues which lie at the root of the Northern Ireland problem. The way forward was in a return to the path on which the Taoiseach and Prime Minister had set out in December 1980. In Mawhinney's view, however, it was only by becoming involved in the processes now provided that progress could be made. If, however, it was the view of the Government that this or any alternative British administration could lay down by fiat arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland, without reference to the real situation on the ground, then they would always be disappointed.

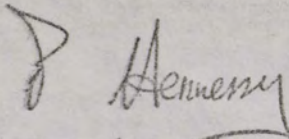
If Dublin was genuinely interested in reviving the special relationship, one contribution which it could make, which more than any other would restore its standing at Westminster, would be to encourage the SDLP to review its decision on participation in the Assembly. Referring to this, as well as some earlier remarks, I pointed out that, apart from totally misunderstanding the nature of the contacts which the SDLP maintains with the Government, as with the other Irish political parties, his comments seemed to miss the whole point of the election results. Although holding up reasonably well, such erosion of the SDLP position as there had been was to the benefit not of the so-called "centre", but of those who took an even harder line. The successes of Provisional Sinn Fein were in spite of, not because, the SDLP struggle to hold the line for constitutional politics against much misunderstanding and incomprehension from its own natural supporters. For obvious reasons, no credible commentator was suggesting that the party would have done better if it had instead supported the British Government initiative.

In the course of our discussion on the role of the Irish Government, Mawhinney said that he had information that there had been a 20% cut in security manpower on the southern side of the border in the recent past. He described this as an unwelcome development. I replied that the present administration had a uniquely successful record in the field of anti-terrorist action, both in its own territory and in terms of effective cross-border security co-operation. This had been testified to on many occasions, both publicly and privately, by senior members of the RUC, as well as, of course by members of the British Government. There was not the slightest doubt that our

forces would enjoy every support and facility to ensure continued maximum effectiveness. [If there is any factual material on the current situation in this respect, it would be appreciated.]

In response to a query regarding the parliamentary tier he gave the impression that he did not expect early action; he was not, he said, "holding his breath". He did not accept that the situation could usefully be analysed in terms of likely concessions to the nationalist point of view. He also said that he thought among MPs there had been a backlash against the fierce criticism of Jim Prior in the Tory press, and that he was unlikely to be involved in any early reshuffle.

Yours sincerely



Patrick P Hennessy  
Press and Information Officer.

c.c. Mr. S. Whelan.

Ms. Margaret Hennessy  
Anglo Irish Division  
Department of Foreign Affairs.