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Meeting between the Government and the Alliance Party

1 August 1984

Present on the Government side were:

The Taoiseach Dr. Garret FitzGerald, T.D.,

The Tanaiste, Mr. Dick Spring, T.D.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr. Peter Barry T.D.,
accompanied by Mr. Walter Kirwan Department of the Taoiseach
and Messrs Lillis, Burke and O Ceallaigh, Department of Foreign
Affairs.

The Alliance Party Delegation consisted of:

The Party Leader, Mr. Oliver Napier

Mr. David Cook, Deputy Leader

Mr. John Cushnahan, Chief Whip,

Mr. Seamus Close,

The Party Chairman, Mrs. Jane Copeland and
Party Secretary, Mrs. Susan Edgar.

The meeting started at 12.30 and concluded at 4.00.

The substantive discussions took place over the lunch table
without adjourning to the Conference Room.

The Taoiseach opened the discussions by saying that the
situation in Northern Ireland has changed significantly and
that 40% of the nationalist vote now goes to Sinn Fein. There
is within the nationalist community an element which could
swing either to the SDLP or Sinn Fein. It is important that
people find it possible to give their support to constitutional
politicians and to the security forces. Nationalists have
tried to refocus their thoughts at a fundamental level. We
accept that for the foreseeable future neither side will get
everything they want (the Taoiseach on a number of occasions
said that nationalists clearly would wish to see a united
Ireland). We are interested in trying to restore a situation
in which people in Northern Ireland can live a reasonable
life. The necessary changes will involve security elements.

Cook interjected to say that there had been a significant improvement in Northern Ireland in recent years and RUC men can now patrol where in the past they could not. The Taoiseach accepted that there is not at present the same violence on the streets that existed in the past. What is central in our thinking is our awareness of the extent to which significant numbers within the minority community see no future in constitutional nationalism. This is a very sinister phenomenon at a political level.

Napier agreed that a very large section of the minority community can not see an acceptable political role for themselves at present. In these circumstances people, though not ideologically committed to the Provisionals, will in anger and in frustration vote Sinn Fein. The rise in the DUP vote and the vote for Paisley is in its own way a mirror image of similar feelings within the majority community. Cushnahan added that the belief is widespread in the minority community that if the unionists and the British refuse to give them a share in power they should take power.

The Minister said that the decisions taken by the Courts to acquit RUC men charged with murder of Catholics confirmed the minority in their view that the judicial system offered them no remedy. Napier said the decision in the Robinson case was difficult to understand. Cushnahan added that Judge Gibson had taken on a political role when he made his comments and that his words were unbelievable. The Taoiseach said both Judge McDermott and Judge Gibson had made impermissible statements in Court which had not been retracted, to which Cook added that the later Gibson statement was perceived in the Protestant Community as being in effect a retraction.

Cushnahan recalled the murders of Catholic Judges by the Provisionals saying the best element in the judiciary had been killed. Gibson is an ally of the Provisionals and the latter would not touch him, (which is sensible terrorist tactics).

He understands however why members of the security forces shoot rather than wait to be shot. Napier added that what was most damaging were the comments made by the Judges not the fact that the RUC men had been acquitted. Cushnahan said the charge should have been a lesser one than murder.

The Taoiseach said that in the 1920's the Irish Government had tried to deal with the problem of policing. The view was taken that any departure from proper standards would not be tolerated. If you are not prepared to do that the whole system of justice is weakened. Until such time as some members of the security forces are found guilty of shooting to kill they will never find acceptance in the minority community. The Minister added that the perception within the minority community is that the police and the judiciary accept that the end justifies the means.

Cushnahan said some people have over stressed alienation. There is in fact a widespread acceptance of the security forces within the minority community and the attitude of the minority to the security forces is improving year by year. The UDR are seen differently and there is a deepening suspicion of them. In his view the RUC is more acceptable than the Army.

The Taoiseach disagreed. He thought the most acceptable security forces was the British Army and that the totality of the security forces is less acceptable now within the minority community that heretofore. Cook repeated that the RUC are now able to do an ordinary policing job in places, including West Belfast, where it was impossible five years ago. Napier said that if there is a burglary in West Belfast people, including Sinn Fein supporters, will contact the RUC. If on the other hand a person is stopped coming home from a dance then it becomes another matter. There is a double standard.

The Taoiseach summing up said that where ordinary crime is concerned people look extensively to the police. The problem is the extent to which large numbers of people do not accept

the police in security matters and the extent to which people expect no redress from the judiciary. This is true not only in working class areas in Belfast but is true for many in the middle class. It is this broad type of alienation which we must tackle no matter what the cost. Napier accepted that alienation is a big problem.

When asked by the Minister if one could differentiate between the age groups within the RUC Cook said that the younger members are more sensitive and better trained than the older ones. (This does not accord with the views we hear elsewhere). Cushnahan added that he suspects some people are joining the RUC for the wrong reasons. He shares Cook's view, but he appreciates there is a sectarian problem. There will continue to be areas where the behaviour of the RUC will be less than what is required.

In response to the Tanaiste who asked how the majority saw the RUC Cushnahan referred to slogans on walls in East Belfast - SS=RUC. The evidence of such slogans is that the RUC are doing an effective job. Cook added that the fact that Paisley has for two years demanded the retirement of the Chief Constable is a sign that Sir John Hermon is doing a good job.

Lillis said that we accept that the RUC have improved. We know that if an ordinary murder occurs in West Belfast the RUC will be called in. We also know that they would come in an armoured car and would post watches around the car. What is important is that they have to protect themselves against terrorists. How can we eliminate the need for them to do this. Napier said this is true, though not for all areas.

The Taoiseach said we have a situation in which ordinary police men are consistently being murdered. How do we cope when 40% of the minority community are willing to vote for those who carry out these murders. We are heading for disintegration. We cannot stand back. If this disintegration is not halted the political consequences of the Provisionals getting more

than 50% of the nationalist vote would be enormous. It could also lead to a significant escalation in violence. The European election is only a temporary halt. What is happening now is different to what has happened in the past. We are in a new situation which takes a political form in a security context. The situation is more dangerous than before. We cannot ignore it and hence the agreement of nationalists to establish the New Ireland Forum. We have tried to expose people in our State to the realities of unionism. We are trying to find some way in which the scale of alienation in the minority community in the North can be reversed, which will reduce the morale of the Provisionals and their ability to use violence. This is nothing to do with a United Ireland. This is what we have to do and unionists have to accommodate themselves as well.

Cushnahan agreed with much of what the Taoiseach said but he thought it would take a long time and asked what would the Taoiseach suggest in the short time. The Taoiseach replied that our problem is that we have no time. We have to make progress quickly. He asked how they saw normal policing being achieved.

Cushnahan said Protestants feel threatened particularly in the border area. Alliance are trying to demonstrate that the SDLP are worthy of positive responses from the unionists. Unfortunately the SDLP, who do not support the security forces, are perceived by Protestants as neutral on terrorism. This makes the task of Alliance more difficult.

The Minister said he had no doubt but some SDLP voters were now voting Sinn Fein though he recognised that the core of Sinn Fein support is new voters. The Taoiseach asked what could be done on policing to enable the SDLP to support them without losing votes.

Napier responded by saying that it is very difficult to get competent Catholics to take judicial posts as it is to get them

to join the RUC. There are two reasons for this. One is that most of them feel that it is not worth their lives to accept such posts. The second is that many Catholics do not commit themselves because they do not know in what direction politics are going in Northern Ireland. They need to feel that they have a place in the sun. On the other hand we have to recognise that Paisley got 230,000 votes. If we are talking about a unitary State there will be bloodshed. The alternative is to find a place in the sun in Northern Ireland for constitutional nationalism.

(in a sufficiently convincing form)

The Taoiseach said there are two essential preconditions.

Firstly the unionist have to have a reassurance that they won't be dragged into a United Ireland. *without the consent of a majority in Northern Ireland.* This has not been available to them in the past from nationalists. Secondly, the identity of the minority must have equality with the identity of the majority. He does not think it is necessary to change sovereignty in order to provide for this. He asked the group to focus on how to resolve these problems.

Cushnahan complained that constitutional nationalists in the North could do more for their own case by spending more time in Northern Ireland than in the U.S., Brussels and Dublin. Cook said that packages cannot be designed. Neither the Protestant community nor the Catholic community are monolithic. There is a minority in each which cannot be accommodated. He was heartened by the recognition of the legitimacy of Irish culture in the OUP document "The Way Forward". Napier accepted that politics have changed since 1973. The change is that both communities believe the British link to be more fragile. There is a heightened expectation within the minority community and a heightened fear within the majority community. That has raised both the stakes and the tension. Sunningdale was an attempt to reach an accommodation within Northern Ireland. Since then a belief has arisen that an accommodation within Northern Ireland is impossible or undesirable. That belief can only lead to total anarchy. The Protestants will make no concessions if British sovereignty is questioned. He accepts the Forum Report has had some positive response in unionist

circles due to the handling of the Government. There is a feeling both within the DUP and OUP that some concession will have to be made though they are nowhere near what the SDLP could accept.

The Taoiseach said that the fundamental change since 1974 has been the growth in support for violence. Cushnahan said that the two communities had moved further apart as the increase in support for Paisley shows. Both the Sinn Fein and Paisley's votes are symptomatic of hardening attitudes in the two communities. The Taoiseach felt that the problem with Sunningdale was that the unionists felt that the ground would move under their feet. We now need to look at something which is seen to be durable and is so. Cook doubted if anything could be durable without the agreement of the Leader of the Opposition. He stressed power-sharing in Northern Ireland, a Parliamentary Tier and improved Anglo-Irish relations. In response to a question from the Minister he said that one way to deal with Parliamentary Tier would be to have the Anglo-Irish Council extended to the Parliamentary level. Alliance have not gone into how a Parliamentary Tier would work but they saw it principally in terms of London and Dublin with room found for those in the Assembly who wish to participate. It should not require a vote in its favour by the Assembly. The Taoiseach asked if it might be triangular Dublin, London, Belfast to which Cushnahan said yes if the numbers contemplated were sufficiently large perhaps 20, 20, 10. He did not think membership should be open to members of the European Parliament. The criteria should be to get reasonable numbers but the reality is that unionists would not participate.

Cushnahan is a member of the Report Committee of the Assembly and within that is trying to formulate proposals for a framework which would entice the SDLP into the Assembly. He does not know however what the SDLP want. The Taoiseach said it is unlikely the SDLP will involve itself in the Assembly until the British Government has given its response to the Forum Report.

Cushnahan said the Forum Report is not a realistic starting point. They do not disagree much with the analysis. They want to re-write Sunningdale. The Minister asked if Chapter 5 gave an opportunity to make progress. Cushnahan responded saying that he found difficulty with the conclusions of the Forum to which the response was made that the only proposals in the Report is Chapter 5.2. and that none of the proposals in 5.2 are inconsistent with what Alliance had said in the meeting. The Taoiseach asked do we all agree with the proposals in 5.2 and do they provide a framework for a solution.

Cushnahan stressed that political parties have interpreted the conclusions differently mentioning 5.7 to which the Taoiseach responded there is a world of difference between "would wish to see" and a proposal. Cook could not see any difference and said the Report did not mention the only realistic solution which is power-sharing within Northern Ireland. The Taoiseach said the proposals in 5.2 are the essence of the Report. The rest is peripheral. The only element we are not prepared to negotiate is 5.2. The Taoiseach added that joint authority does not necessarily involve a change in sovereignty. The Minister stressed that everything in the Report is acceptable to all the main political parties in this State and the Report remains an agenda.

The Tanaiste said that they had spent 12 difficult months on the Forum Report and given it a lot of time and effort. He asked to what do they object in the reality and requirements section (5.1, 5.2). No member of the Government has made a speech in favour of a united Ireland and this Government has moved further away from that than any other.

Cushnahan said that while we agree on causes we might disagree on the remedy. The statement issued by Alliance the previous day [to which the Government took exception] was issued because they are dealing with perceptions. People in the North think the conclusion of the Report is a united Ireland. The events

which happened on the day on which the Report was issued are important. He said that they welcomed the manner in which the Government is handling the Report. Lillis asked would Alliance be prepared to be helpful by saying that the Taoiseach had told them that the only proposals/conclusions in the Report are 5.2 and that they accept that interpretation. Cook criticised the lack of activity on the part of the British Government. They seem willing to deal only with one or two points at a time rather than with the main issues together.

The Taoiseach said we have tried to open up attitudes. The descriptive analysis in the Report should be helpful, certain models are put forward and it is accepted there are other views. He asked why had Alliance rejected the Report out of hand and why specifically had they rejected the joint authority model. Cook responded saying that the reason lies in their asking to what extent the Government believes it can get the support of the opposition. The Taoiseach said that the consent of the opposition is not necessary for durability.

Napier said there is nothing in 5.2 with which they disagree. They disagree with 5.7. He thinks 5.8 and 5.9 are not pointing in the right direction. Could other views be discussed on the basis of 5.2 (from which they do not dissent). Cushnahan spent some time parsing the "framework for a new Ireland" in 5.2 asking if a better relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic and partnership in Northern Ireland could be so defined. Cook repeated there is alienation in both communities and asked if sufficient ground could be found in the centre to provide durability.

The Taoiseach said durability is important for the unionists. They should not see a solution as a step on the road to Irish unity and it should provide reassurance of sovereignty unless the attitudes of the population change. At the same time it should provide a sense for the minority that they are equal and that their aspiration to Irish unity can remain. The first - to agree to a fixing of sovereignty - is difficult for us. On

the other side how can the minority be given equality with the majority. It can't be done by a change of sovereignty but within existing sovereignty. Unless the nationalist community can look to their traditional aspiration and to this State as the majority look to London then there will be no durability. The Minister said many think time is past when a Sunningdale Mark II could succeed.

Cushnahan said unionists see joint authority as a diminution of sovereignty. The Taoiseach said that Britain can decide within the bounds of sovereignty how to administer Northern Ireland. The three models are illustrative. The Minister stressed that we are awaiting the views of the British and we have not yet reached the stage of discussing anything in detail. Cushnahan said he is not interested in the three models. He wants to look at other solutions which could meet the criteria of the Government and of the unionists. A gradualist approach is required and he cannot at this stage see the unionists coming to a conference table. Cook repeated that it would be difficult to get the British to take any initiative. The Taoiseach asked Alliance to leave time for the British to react and do not anticipate too much. Further discussion then took place on the Parliamentary Tier on which the Taoiseach mentioned that he doubted if the Alliance position would be adequate to solve current problems particularly in the security area. The proposals of the New Ireland Forum Report could not be more open. He asked if Alliance could not assent to 5.2. Both power sharing and a parliamentary tier would be important elements of any solution with the terms of 5.2. After Cushnahan had repeated his earlier objections, Napier said there is an area where the British Government cannot impose a solution. The Report Committee of the Assembly cannot go far enough to accommodate the SDLP. An imposed solution from the British would be unacceptable to unionists. He does not take exception to 5.2. There will be no consent from unionists for anything they see as a step to unity. He accepts that the possibility of an eventual unitary State cannot be ruled out for the nationalists. How do you deal with these two

aspirations and achieve stability. Can some progress be made which does not disaffect the unionist community?

The Taoiseach asked Alliance to think about (i) what can be done to ensure the nationalists that their identity is on an equal footing with the unionist identity (ii) what can be done to achieve a situation in which the security forces can operate normally and which deal with support for terrorists. The Minister added that if a solution is not based on changes in security structures it will not be acceptable. Cushnahan repeated the point made about power sharing and about the Parliamentary Tier.

At this stage as the meeting was coming to a close there was a brief exchange about the position on Kinsale Gas. The Tánaiste said that we supported the agreement made last November. We feel that all contingencies were allowed for in that agreement and we have gone back to the British on that basis. We now await their response.

Cushnahan said they welcomed the Government's stand in bringing Shannon and McGlinchey to the Supreme Court. They accepted it was a matter for the courts but they appreciated the effort the Attorney General had put into the prosecutions. The extraditions would be helpful in Northern Ireland. The meeting ended with the Alliance delegation thanking the Government for it.

D.O.

D. O Ceallaigh
3 August 1984