

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2015/89/84
Creation Date(s):	10 October 1985
Extent and medium:	4 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
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Meetings with Prof. David Harkness and Rev. Sydney Callaghan,
Belfast, 8 October 1985

I met separately in Belfast on 8 October with Prof. David Harkness, a respected QUB academic of moderate Unionist views who made a submission to the Forum, and Rev. Sydney Callaghan, a former President of the Methodist Church in Ireland who also made a Forum submission.

Among the points which Harkness made were the following:

- He fully supports the present talks, to the extent that he can gauge their content from media speculation. They provide a unique opportunity to get the SDLP to operate again within the context of Northern Ireland and thus to restore a measure of stability, both political and economic, to Northern Ireland. As it appears that Unionists will be given full guarantees on sovereignty, they have "absolutely no excuse" to deny the agreement a chance of working. Harkness was quite adamant that the British Government "must make Unionists swallow some medicine". He also made clear his view that it is right for the Dublin Government to be allowed to represent the minority "on a day-to-day basis" in Northern Ireland.

- When I enquired to what extent his views are shared elsewhere in the Unionist community, Harkness replied that the tendency "in the common room" (i.e., among fellow academics in Queen's) is to say: "If you give them an inch, they will simply look for another inch". In other words, any concession to the minority, however innocuous, could precipitate a series of steadily escalating demands leading ultimately to a united Ireland. Reflecting ironically on the phrase "giving an inch", Harkness commented that "there's quite a lot of giving to be done by the Unionists - everything, in fact!"

- The British Government will have to "ride out" the expected Unionist opposition to an Anglo-Irish agreement if this "unique opportunity" to restore stable and peaceful conditions to Northern Ireland is not to be lost. However, Harkness is not sanguine about Mrs. Thatcher's determination to do so. He also suspects that "the wrong kind of advice" may be reaching her from the Northern Ireland Office. To counteract the latter's influence, it is most important that Mrs. Thatcher should be made aware of the minimum which the SDLP will require in a package in order to be able to sell it to the minority. She could then argue to the Unionist politicians that, if they want the IRA to be defeated, they must be prepared to concede at least this much to the minority. What matters above all is to "remove the water in which the IRA fish thrive". As the present talks are quite clearly aimed at this, Unionists have no right to try to undermine them.

- Harkness feels that the time has come for Unionists "to stand up and be counted". He therefore wrote to the "Irish Times" (7 October) and to the "Newsletter" in support of a letter from an Anglican nun which had appeared in both newspapers some days earlier and which called on Unionists to dissociate themselves from the stance taken by their intransigent politicians. Harkness wrote that "the object of the current talks must surely be the reduction of murder and destruction and the promotion of peaceful political activity" and argued to Unionists that "measures designed to meet the needs of those of their fellow citizens anxious to play a fuller role in the province's life, but currently disenchanting by aspects of its political, legal and security systems, must be welcomed". He suggested that the right package could make Sinn Fein irrelevant and urged that "no Unionist should jeopardise by his actions any agreement capable of bringing about such a result".

- Harkness is dismissive of the proposed Unionist tactic of forcing by-elections. He sees it as an attempt to replay the situation in early 1974 when Heath, in total indifference to the sensitivity surrounding the Sunningdale Agreement, called a general election and thus "played into Paisley's hands". Harkness' wry comment on this was that "if ever there was an argument in favour of Irish unity, i.e., of Irishmen running their own affairs, this was it". In calling an election at that time, the British Government allowed the Sunningdale Agreement to be destroyed through sheer indifference and carelessness. He recalled that Whitelaw, on hearing that an election had been called, told a colleague of his: "That's the end of power-sharing".

Among the points made by Rev. Sydney Callaghan, a leading Methodist clergyman in Belfast (who was born in the South but has a Northern wife), were the following:

- Working-class Protestants in East Belfast (which Callaghan knows well through his ministry) have been quiescent up to now in relation to the Anglo-Irish talks but, as the tide of media speculation mounts, they are becoming more restless. Unlike middle-class Protestants - who (like their counterparts of other affiliations) are capable of thinking in more conceptual terms - working-class Protestants think very much in the concrete terms of "here and now". They perceive an immediate threat and, irrespective of any longer-term benefits in terms of political and economic stability, their instinct is to resist it and to distrust anybody who argues otherwise. They have an abiding distrust of the Irish Government but, "more particularly", of the British Government. At any moment, in their view, the British Government is capable of pulling the plug on Northern Ireland, despite all the reassurances given by politicians. They see no reason to assume that this could not happen now.

- Middle-class Protestants are more likely to give an agreement a chance to work before condemning it. There is a fear, however, that Unionist politicians will (as they have already shown signs of doing) feel compelled to "get in on the act" alongside the Loyalist paramilitants in resisting an agreement.

- Callaghan nonetheless regards a sustained UWC-type strike as unlikely: Loyalist paramilitants are not as well-organised as the IRA, they lack stamina and they know that they will be firmly resisted this time by the British Army. The likeliest scenario is a campaign of random assassinations of Catholics in Belfast.

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10 October 1985

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