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## ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

*W. Corbett*Northern Ireland*J*Taoiseach's Meeting with Sir Ninian Stephen

The Taoiseach met Sir Ninian for about forty-five minutes in his office on 28th May. Sir Ninian was accompanied by his Aide, Mr. George Thompson. The undersigned accompanied the Taoiseach. The discussion was cordial and discursive. The main point appeared to be the message which Secretary of State Mayhew had conveyed to Sir Ninian that if the SDLP don't withdraw significant parts of their proposals, there was a considerable risk that not only would Strand II not commence but that the talks process would break down.

This note is not a verbatim report.

- Stephen: I am glad of this opportunity to be in Dublin: I will in London tomorrow. I am not going to Ulster because Mayhew recommends against it. The situation there is sensitive. All political parties in the talks are now feeling highly pressured. My information is that a breakdown is close anyway. Mayhew has told me that if the SDLP don't withdraw significant parts of their papers, a breakdown is inevitable. I left yesterday's meeting with the impression that the Secretary of State was considerably depressed by the prospect.
- Taoiseach: Yes, I recognise that a breakdown is a possibility. Are we to assume that there just is no chance of taking the papers as they are, without commitment, and going to Strand II? After all, nothing is agreed until everything is agreed. Equally, I suppose you could argue that nothing fails until everything has been given a chance to fail. A breakdown would be disappointing - very sad.
- Stephen: The Unionists and the Alliance are apparently thinking of walking out if the provisions relating to the Executive, as put forward by the SDLP, are not changed. They particularly object to the proposal for a European Community and a Dublin representative on the Executive and they want it withdrawn.
- Taoiseach: I have always tried to take an even-handed approach in this whole area. I strongly believe that if you do not, there will no progress. I live 30 miles from the border and I have many contacts with the people in Northern Ireland - as

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Taoiseach: distinct from the politicians there. They appreciate straight talking - as do people down here. The Unionists talk about Articles 2 and 3, but when I asked them what doing something about them would achieve, they just do not seem to know.

Then there is the 1920 Act. There just is no good talking about part of the problem which really has its origin in the 1920 Act without also talking about that Act. It must be possible to find a way of living together in Ireland - my main concern is the search for peace. We can talk about structures and agendas and we can make these to suit any occasion but really, the essential question is what will bring peace. We have had more than twenty years of violence now for which politicians up there must bear their share of responsibility.

I talk to business people in the North. We could do a lot more buying and selling to each other. Also, the interests of the North are not similar to the U.K. but to ours. Look at agriculture for example; and the Cohesion and Structural Funds. Northern Ireland is not a recipient on the scale that we are because their interests are different from the British interests and the British do the negotiating for them.

There are so many interests there which are similar to our own. Businessmen see that the politicians are really behind the business people and the ordinary people in the North in their attitudes. I spoke to a friend of mine in Portadown some time ago. He was a strong Unionist and had never been in the South. He was genuinely afraid of coming down here and was amazed to see me getting into my car at 11.00 o'clock at night to drive home. I told him that all this was a lot of nonsense. Did he want his children and my children to go through the same thing as our generations have gone through; we are not going anywhere if we persist with these attitudes. Business people have a lot in common and we should try to build on it.

I asked my friend what he would do if Santa Claus were cut off; and some day Santa Claus will stop calling to Northern Ireland. The British already support them to an extent of £2bn. sterling annually, at least. The cost here, for extra security alone - without counting trade, tourism etc. losses is about £200m. a year - an even heavier burden than that borne by the British Exchequer, when you compare our relative resources.

Stephen: You are saying in very clear language that the answer lies with the U.K.

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Taoiseach: The answer lies there.

When I was Minister for Tourism and Transport, responsible for the National Television Authority, I got them to put television transmitters in the Cooley mountains and in Donegal so that the ordinary people in Northern Ireland could see what the South of Ireland was really like: they must see that we are not all IRA people down here - but Paisley objected even to that.

The next stage must be to build economic bridges. We must use the CII and the CUB contacts: the Chambers of Commerce and all similar types of organisations. I had fifty children from Enniskillen down here yesterday. These are contacts I value.

We are living in a changing world: the European Community is changing rapidly: the Berlin Wall has come down; the Warsaw Pact no longer exists. After the 1st January, even the physical signs of the border will come down. The customs posts will be gone.

Stephen: I hadn't thought of that: the border will lose a lot of its significance.

Taoiseach: Yes: and we must remember that most of the atrocities are not at the border. Arms finds down here occur miles away. The argument that the border is an aid to terrorism is not real. Sometimes security people put forward this argument to cover their own deficiencies.

I would agree that the border areas have been something of an economic wasteland, especially in the South, because of our different tax regimes; but now that we have harmonised our taxes, that is ceasing to be the case.

We must use schemes like the International Fund for Ireland, INTERREG, etc. to get people in border areas working together. I believe in a bottom up/top down approach.

Stephen: Can you see progress from those activities?

Taoiseach: Yes and from major tourism etc. projects. We are spending £20-£30m. on a canal to link the Erne and the Shannon - which will make it virtually possible to sail from Belfast to Limerick.

Stephen: The border - that was really the original curse!

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Taoiseach: Yes, and the 1920 Act recognised that. It proposed a Council of Ireland, with admittedly minimal functions like fisheries and railways.

Stephen: Would you say that the two parts of Ireland are growing further apart?

Taoiseach: Yes - I think that would be a fair conclusion. Up to 1969, we were probably coming closer together, even though there were social tensions. But twenty years of violence have driven the communities apart.

Stephen: Is the duration of the violence doing this?

Taoiseach: Partly - you must remember the number of families who have suffered.

Stephen: Surely there must be some sense of sheer exasperation - surely people must say something must be done.

Taoiseach: That feeling certainly is there. For example, look at the tactical voting recently by the Unionist people which resulted in an SDLP M.P. being elected instead of Gerry Adams: the whole situation is so tragic that it needs strong handling. I will be saying this to Major in Rio.

Stephen: Prime Minister Keating will not be going - he has his own domestic reasons for this.

Taoiseach: I will be meeting Major there. I do not carry any baggage on this problem: neither does he. Both of us have that advantage.

Stephen: There is so much on which agreement has been reached in the talks: like the question of a Parliament or Assembly: 85 members: elections by PR: a Bill of Rights for the North - they have all this in common.

Taoiseach: Yes, I agree with you. And they should be able to regard the fundamentals as being of less importance than this sort of agreement.

John Major told me when I met him recently: "I don't know anything about Ireland". I told him "yes, that is a plus for you." It will help him to deal with the problem.

Look at the personalities of the protagonists now. Paisley was one time more interested in power but not so much today. He has spent so much time in Opposition that I doubt if he really could handle responsibility. Robinson seemed to be



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- Taoiseach: taking a more progressive attitude but recently he seems to have been standing aside and McCrea is coming more to the fore.
- Stephen: We can only hope that the whole thing doesn't collapse next week as Mayhew says it will if the SDLP proposals are persisted in. We will then see each of the four main parties trying to blame the other.
- Taoiseach: Why don't they put all the papers off the table and go to Strand II?
- I asked Major what the fundamental objectives of the talks were? What end did he really seek in them? He never showed his hand.
- Stephen: In a way, I suppose that is understandable. The objective for you, which you can claim, would be splendid for you: but for him, the same objective would not have the same effects - and certainly naming it would not.
- Taoiseach: Peter Brooke as Secretary of State said that the British had no strategic, economic or political interest in remaining in Northern Ireland: that was a most significant statement.
- Stephen: The Unionists don't see the European Community in the same way as you do. Why?
- Taoiseach: I am not at all sure that that would be completely true. For example, if you speak to Northern farmers, they will tell you of their common interest with the South.
- There is no way in which there will be any rowing back from the Anglo-Irish Agreement.
- The British really have never taken seriously - or got it across - that the days of the veto are over.
- Stephen: Is this some elaborate game of poker?
- Taoiseach: I just don't know. All I can speak about is conditions here. Sometimes it is claimed that we exercise discrimination here: that just does not register down here. People do not really understand the claim.
- Stephen: But it is a very strong myth in Northern Ireland: they genuinely believe that Protestants are ill-treated down here.
- Taoiseach: There is no way in which that is true: for example, in school we bend over backwards to make sure that minority religions are catered for.

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Stephen: Is there any question that the parties are holding back to the last moment - and then making their move to Strand II or do they really believe that there is not all that much to be lost if the talks fail.

Taoiseach: That could be true of Molyneaux. I believe that he is not seriously interested in the outcome. He is comfortable in Westminster and would like to remain comfortable there. He is now 72 years of age or something like that and could not easily contemplate change.

But for the SDLP, the picture is different. Hume and others there are tireless workers. They wouldn't like a breakdown. They have walked a tightrope in their negotiating positions - especially viz-a-viz Sinn Fein.

Time and again, they have had Sinn Fein flat and then the British Army resurrect them by some stupid incident or atrocity. Guerilla warfare just cannot be sustained unless it has the support of the population; and that support drains away until the British do something which revives it all again.

In fact, that was the origin of the IRA in the present campaign. In 1969 they were virtually non-existent. The human rights campaigners then were not IRA members; but then the IRA came into place as defenders of areas and communities.

Stephen: Yes, Minister Flynn told me that when you get the population ringing up the security forces, that's the death knell of the IRA.....

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Sir Ninian then thanked the Taoiseach for his very full and graphic description of the situation as he saw it. The time was not 6.45 p.m. approximately and Sir Ninian apologised for keeping him so long.



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Dermot Nally  
29th May, 1992.

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c.c. Noel Dorr, Joe Brosnan, Sean O'hUiginn, Brian McCarthy.