



**An Chartlann Náisiúnta**  
**National Archives**

**Reference Code:** 2021/95/43

**Creator(s):** Department of the Taoiseach

**Accession Conditions:** Open

**Copyright:** National Archives, Ireland.  
May only be reproduced with  
the written permission of the  
Director of the National  
Archives.

Copied to file 5.25541W

c c De Munnigh

W h c ~~test~~

RST  
PSS  
Mr. Murray  
Mr. Dalton  
✓ Paul Landon  
Paul Sec.  
Oh

(27)

22  
11

CONFIDENTIAL

A/Sec O hUiginn

Conversations with Belfast Journalists

18/11

I visited Belfast on 10 November to meet a number of Belfast based journalists - Ed Maloney (Sunday Tribune), David McKittrick (Independent), Ann Cadwallader (Irish Press) and Finnoula O'Connor (Formerly with Fortnight, now a freelance for the Economist). While briefing them on recent developments, I took the opportunity to get their perspective on the situation. While I took issue with many of their comments, nonetheless some of their observations may be of interest:

Hume / Adams:

All four journalists spoke at some length and in much the same terms about the widespread support among nationalists of all classes in Northern Ireland for the Hume/Adams process. While British hostility to the process had been anticipated, there had been widespread bitterness among nationalists at what was widely perceived as Dublin's acquiescence with the terms of the Brussels Communique which was seen as an attempt to kill-off the initiative. While the Government's insistence on the development of a framework for peace is seen in a positive light by Nationalists, nonetheless nationalist suspicions of the Government's long-term intentions remains.

The widespread lack of faith among nationalists in a revival of the talks process means that for them, the Hume/Adams process is the only realistic political initiative which has been placed on the agenda in recent years. In relation to a revival of the talks process, all four outlined the following prevailing attitudes among nationalists:

- The Talks are widely perceived as a pointless exercise designed to allow the British Government to show that they are "doing something" while at the same time allowing the Tories to keep the UUP on board in the context of maintaining their tenuous Commons majority.
- There is no faith among nationalists that unionists are in any way ready to envisage any significant compromise. All four journalists shared this perception of continuing unionist paralysis / intransigence, with Maloney describing the current unionist position as "waiting at the 1974 (Sunningdale) bus-stop but still only wanting to pay half-fare". None of the journalists could envisage the unionists making any significant concession or compromise on the constitutional issue in terms of a meaningful Irish dimension. In that context, they pointed

to the lack of any serious positive response on the part of unionists to the six principles which were seen by nationalists as, if anything, over-generous to unionist concerns.

- In relation to the internal dimension, none of them could see the unionists agreeing to a Sunningdale level of power-sharing but only to some form of watered-down version. In any event, all four journalists were of the view that nationalists had no enthusiasm for devolution - seeing the alternative of direct rule coupled with the Anglo-Irish Agreement as preferable to any devolutionary settlement which would be likely to emerge.

While support for Hume/Adams is widespread among nationalists, it is based on no more than an instinctive belief that "Hume must have seen something worthwhile" in order to persuade him to put his career on the line. All four were of the view that whatever Hume's personal problems, his standing among nationalists is undiminished.

For Unionists, the opposite is the case. Hume's formula of "trust me" is wasted on unionists - they certainly do not trust Hume. There is deep suspicion that "something is going on" and they are not reassured by Molyneaux's apparent smugness about his "understanding" with Major. Among Unionists, memories are still fresh of a similar smugness on the part of Molyneaux in 1985 just before the bombshell of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Overall, all four journalists had a sense that they were witnessing a "defining moment" in terms of Northern Ireland on a number of fronts:

- Sinn Fein:

It was apparent to all four that something is moving in terms of Sinn Fein policy with McKittrick of the view that "Hume must have spotted some sort of level of Provo acceptance that the Brits are not getting out". Ed Maloney was critical of what he described as the Southern tendency to ignore the Provos and to dismiss them as a bunch of psychopaths. While he could understand Southern detestation of the Provos, nonetheless they are a considerable force in Northern Ireland politics and cannot be ignored. (In this context, he referred as an example to Garrett Fitzgerald's recent book which "analysed many things in some considerable detail yet dismissed the Provos with simple one-liners as if they were of no importance".) In his view, Provo thinking has evolved considerably over the past twenty years - particularly during the 1980's. They are no longer a simple "United Ireland of nothing" party - that element having largely disappeared with the final exit of the

O'Bradaigh faction some years ago. He sees the current Sinn Fein leadership as more pragmatic and, while no longer realistically looking for a simple unitary state formula, have a bottom line in terms of wanting some sort of constitutional balance in terms of nationalism / unionism which at a minimum underwrites and protects the position of nationalists / republicans within Northern Ireland while leaving open a potentially realisable opportunity for a United Ireland at some time in the future.

Maloney's own analysis of what Hume and Adams had achieved is based on a re-reading of the papers exchanged between the SDLP and Sinn Fein in 1988 and revolves around the principles of self-determination / consent - with some sort of declaration by the British endorsing the right of the Irish people to self-determination; to be followed by some sort of "Conference" where the Provos would accept the concept of the necessity for majority consent within Northern Ireland. Maloney described the formula as "theological" in that it would involve a British concession on a theoretical front coupled with a Provo concession on a practical front. The reality would be a Provo acceptance of partition in the short to medium term - something which Maloney described as a major and fundamental concession by the Provos. He cautioned that if his analysis is correct, that this shift in Provo thinking should not be ascribed to Provo weakness. While the leadership is now middle-aged, there is no shortage of recruits available to maintain the movement which he described as an organic part of certain nationalist communities in Northern Ireland.

As to the type of Conference envisaged, Maloney understands from some of his contacts that Sinn Fein have been taking an interest in the current Conference in South Africa and in a recent similar exercise in El Salvador. His understanding is that they have requested papers on both from some of their academic sympathisers.

Maloney commented that the formula is designed to be sold to a British Government with a more secure majority than that enjoyed by John Major. The rejection of the formula will suit Sinn Fein - leaving them on something of a high moral ground among their supporters and allowing for the formula to be given another airing in 2 or 3 years when hopefully from their point of view, there will be a Government in Britain with a more secure majority and when Gerry Adams has been returned as MP for West Belfast. Such a lapse in time would also have the advantage of allowing for the ideas involved to take root among their own supporters.

SDLP:

The Hume/Adams process is seen as marking a defining moment for the SDLP though all four journalists were



unsure as to its long-term effects. All four felt that the Hume/Adams formula would be made public - probably sooner rather than later though this is likely to depend on the outcome of the December summit. Much will depend on what the Hume / Adams formula contains. If nationalists judge the formula to be reasonable, then Hume's, and by extension Adams', stock will rise. If the formula is seen to be unrealistic, then Hume will be seen to have been conned by the Provos - a development which would damage both Hume and Adams - Hume for having allowed himself to be conned; and Adams for conning him.

- Dublin Government:

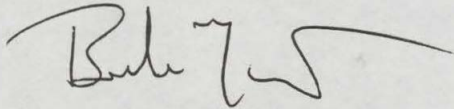
All four of the journalists could also see a defining moment emerging in terms of the Government's relationship with Northern nationalism. Recent flexibility in relation to Articles 2 & 3, the six principles and the Brussels Communique were all seen as signs of the Government moving some distance from the northern nationalist agenda in order to reach out to unionist opinion in Northern Ireland. At the same time, the Government's prioritising of the development of a framework for peace is seen as reassuring to nationalist public opinion North and South. McKittrick commented that it places the Government in a better position if the peace process does not succeed - "if the process had collapsed last week in the aftermath of the Brussels Communique the blame would have attached to the Provos and Dublin; if it collapses now, the blame will attach to the Provos and London".

- Violence:

Obviously the recent upsurge in sectarian violence has contributed to this sense of "a defining moment" and has had a deep impact on the public in Northern Ireland creating a widespread mood of depression - a mood which the Hume/Adams initiative seems to have captured, at least on the nationalist side. Maloney mentioned that over the past year he had detected a significant growth in sectarian attitudes on the nationalist side. While this may well be in response to the upsurge in loyalist sectarian attacks over the same period, he confessed that he had been deeply disturbed by some of the remarks which he had heard from people on the nationalist side whom he would not have suspected as having a sectarian attitude. He had covered the funeral of Thomas Begley who had planted the Shankill bomb and had been taken aback by the size of the funeral which he described as the largest IRA funeral he had seen since the hunger strikes. He also thought the recent scenes at Limavady Courthouse noteworthy - not just in terms of the picture of the obvious "nutcases" charged with the Greysteel massacre, but also in terms of the angry crowd scenes outside the Courthouse in an area like Limavady which by and large has not seen the worst of the troubles over the years.

Both Maloney and Finnoula O'Connor had a palpable sense of the two communities drawing ever further apart in recent times in a way reminiscent of the early 1970's.

While a defining moment is perceived in relation to Nationalism and Republicanism, none of the journalists could see a similar defining moment in relation to the British Government or Ulster Unionism. The British Government is widely seen as being in thrall to the arithmetic in the House of Commons - a factor which they felt would lead the British to do as little as possible while granting small integrationist concessions to keep the UUP on side. In relation to Ulster Unionism, all were convinced that the DUP are now focused on maintaining, and hopefully increasing, Paisley's vote the European Election. The UUP is seen as banking on their "understanding" with the Tories to ensure that Dublin and nationalism is kept in check and that the tide is rolled back in terms of some essentially integrationist concessions from Westminster. As McKittrick described it (somewhat colourfully) - "Molyneaux is a one trick pony. He believes in grabbing the British Government by their vitals to extract concessions. In current circumstances this may work. However, if it fails he has no other tricks in his locker".



Brendan McMahon  
Press Counsellor

12 November 1993