



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/48/177

Creator(s): Department of Foreign Affairs

Accession Conditions: Open

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

PA



IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

17, GROSVENOR PLACE,
SW1X 7HR
Telephone: 071-235 2171
TELEX: 916104
Fax: 071-245 6961

CONFIDENTIAL

16 June, 1994.

Mr. Seán O hUiginn,
Assistant Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs,
St. Stephen's Green,
DUBLIN 2.

PST
PSS
Mr F Murray
Dr M Mangan
Mr T Dalton
Joint Sec
✓
YE
17/6
JLW
16/6

Dear Assistant Secretary,

Conversation with Sir Christopher France

The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defence, Sir Christopher France, joined me for lunch at the Embassy on 13 June. He replaced Sir Michael Quinlan in that position two years ago, having been Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health, and before that of the combined Department of Health and Social Security, for the previous five years. His earlier career was in the Treasury and his only previous experience of the Ministry of Defence was in the period 1981 - 84 when he served there on secondment. Although he was within two years of retirement when asked to take over the top job in Defence in 1992, he did so on the understanding that he would get a year's extension and serve for three years. He is therefore due to retire in April, 1995. Although he has made a number of visits to Northern Ireland his knowledge of the situation there is rather limited. Nevertheless, I am reporting hereunder the main points of interest that emerged from our conversation.

The Mull of Kintyre Helicopter Crash

Although the investigation into the cause of the crash has not yet been completed, Sir Christopher was of the view that it resulted from pilot error. (Mr. Ian Lang, the Secretary of State for Scotland, with whom I discussed the matter briefly last night, is of the same view, believing that a favourable tail wind may have resulted in the helicopter reaching the area of the crash sooner than the pilot realised). The Permanent Secretary said the death of so many key intelligence officers represents a serious loss in the campaign against

terrorism. He pointed out that with a good flow of secret information the security forces were able to thwart 80% of planned acts of terrorism. The main loss would be felt in the area of assessment and analysis of intelligence material or, to use France's own words, putting the pieces of the jig-saw together. (A similar view was expressed by Sir Paul Condon, the Head of the London Metropolitan Police, with whom I had a short discussion on the matter last night. He told me he knew all the operatives who died in the crash). Sir Christopher expressed the view that the replacement officers will slot into their positions very quickly and will be effective within 3 or 4 months when one might expect them to take 8 or 9 months to make the adjustment. He said that the messages of sympathy received from the Irish Government were greatly appreciated as was the attendance of the Garda Commissioner at the funeral in Belfast. These gestures were perceived as new and generous on the British side.

The Hewitt Report

Unfortunately Sir Christopher betrayed total ignorance of this important report, as did Sir John Wheeler some weeks ago when we also raised the matter with him. I formed the strong impression that the Permanent Secretary was rather smug and sanguine about the behaviour of troops in Northern Ireland and the way in which they related to the ordinary people. He spoke about the good relations the soldiers there enjoyed and how they are regularly offered cups of tea. I reminded him that matters were not at all as rosy as he imagined and that this was borne out in the Hewitt Report which had identified many problems and shortcomings. It was most important that Hewitt's criticisms be studied very carefully and that his recommendations be implemented. It was not sufficient that officers only be seized of the need to maintain good relations with the people and that they be treated with proper respect. There was a particular need to get this message across to the soldiers on the ground who had day-to-day contact with the people. I went on to say that Hewitt had identified serious weaknesses in the procedure for investigating complaints against the military, including undue delay. I also mentioned that there was a tendency also on the part of some military personnel to overstep the mark just before completing a tour of duty in Northern Ireland, in order to settle old scores. Sir Christopher said that any serious breach of discipline was dealt with severely, as was clear in the aftermath of the Coalisland incident. The training, experience and patience inherent in military service in Northern Ireland had served the British soldiers well in Bosnia where they were very effective, he said.

Crossmaglen

The Permanent Secretary did not seem to be aware of the concern caused by the fortification work currently in progress and I found it necessary to repeat the arguments we adduced in recent weeks within and without the IGC. He confined himself initially to an expression of thanks for the cooperation of our security forces. I went back over the history of this messy affair which saw a succession of British "own goals" and an alienation of the local people. Little or no attention seemed to have been attached to political considerations. The mistreatment of John Fee, which had brought a lot of bad publicity to the IRA, had been largely undone and the constant flying of the Union Jack in the heart of a predominantly Nationalist town was seen as provocative by many locals. I told him we had suggested to Sir John Wheeler some weeks ago that the number of occasions on which the Union Jack is flown should be drastically reduced to coincide with RUC practice. The Minister had taken careful note of what we had said but Sir Christopher betrayed no knowledge of that. With regard to the flag, he thought it would be a source of comfort to hard-pressed soldiers, living in uncomfortable, hostile surroundings, to have the flag flying all the time. I gave him a lecture on the realities of life in Northern Ireland and how flags and emblems exacerbated the situation there down through the years.

Before leaving the subject of Crossmaglen I repeated the need for greater political sensitivity on the British side and the necessity of discussing planned works in border areas with us well in advance. What was happening now in Crossmaglen was hardly the kind of peace signal the Governments were keen to convey at this delicate juncture.

Needless to say, the recent shooting down of a British Army helicopter was used by the Permanent Secretary in justification of their action in bolstering the military defences at Crossmaglen. I strongly emphasised the need to remove as many as possible of the attendant inconveniences, including the outlying obstacles and barriers constructed while the work was in progress. Enough damage had already been done in alienating the local people in that staunchly nationalist town, with the IRA as the main beneficiaries.

Closure of Cross-Border Roads

I raised this issue for the purpose of getting across the obvious message that if closure causes great inconvenience and dislocation for the local people the IRA will benefit from the consequential anger and resentment. A very careful, sensitive approach involving maximum consultation with our side and a constant review of closed crossings was required. Needless to say, Sir Christopher placed all the emphasis on the security argument.

Accompaniment

The Permanent Secretary gave the impression that he was totally unfamiliar with this subject and, as a result, no proper discussion developed. I had to confine myself to an exhortation to achieve a much higher level of accompaniment.

The Royal Irish Regiment (RIR)

I asked France how the RIR was developing. He said he and the Army authorities were extremely pleased. The old UDR now felt it was properly integrated into the British Army, instead of being perceived as a local militia raised from one community only. At a current strength of 6,000, it represented one-third of the Army presence in Northern Ireland.

Cost of the Military Presence in N.I.

Asked whether the recent severe pruning of the military establishment in Britain, and United Nations commitments in Bosnia, had placed a strain on resources, Sir Christopher said that they were able to manage. The substantial cost of the Northern Ireland operation had not led to any serious internal debates. The commitments there were regarded as a national priority. If, however, further U.N. demands were placed upon them in future, e.g. in relation to North Korea, there would be a manpower problem.

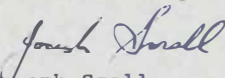
Arms Finds in the South

Sir Christopher commented very positively on the success of the Gardaí in discovering caches of arms and ammunition. Many lives had been saved in consequence.

Peace Prospects

In an effort to get some insight into Ministry of Defence thinking at the highest level about the prospects for peace in Northern Ireland, the Permanent Secretary offered the view that the conflict would continue for two to three more years. Asked about a possible scenario where the majority of the IRA and Loyalist organisations agreed to a permanent cessation of violence and ginger groups persisted in continuing the struggle, France said there would be an obligation on both Governments to move strongly against such elements.

Yours sincerely,


Joseph Small
Ambassador.