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Tuesday, December 30, 2008

War of words over bombers 'fled South' remark by Mason

EAMON PHOENIX/JOHN BEW in Belfast and in London

ANGLO IRISH RELATIONS: THE FIRST face-to-face meeting between Northern secretary of state Roy Mason and minister for foreign affairs Michael O'Kennedy was marred by a war of words over remarks by taoiseach Jack Lynch on Irish unity and Mason's suggestion that the IRA perpetrators of the La Mon bombing atrocity in which 12 died, had "fled South".

At the outset of the meeting in Iveagh House on May 5th, 1978, O'Kennedy said his government had been very concerned that, without any notice to them, the secretary of state indicated that those responsible for La Mon might have come South. It had provoked a severe reaction in Dublin.

O'Kennedy told Mason he believed there was the closest co-operation between the two police forces on the island. "The IRA were looking for a long-term role for themselves at the expense of the Irish government. There need be no public or private apprehension about their commitment against the IRA. They were very concerned that the UK government showed any doubt about this," the report of the meeting states.

Mason said there had been irritants on both sides including references to Irish unity. When British prime minister Jim Callaghan had met the taoiseach, they had agreed to differ.

On La Mon "he had simply said that those responsible might possibly have gone to the South because of the wave of revulsion against them in the North". O'Kennedy said that even to refer to it as a possibility caused a serious problem in the South.

Mason replied that Lynch's January interview had stopped inter-party talks on the North and caused the British side a lot of concern.

O'Kennedy rejected this view, saying that "Mr Lynch was the last person to want to give succour to the terrorists".

O'Kennedy said one of the central themes of Irish policy was to show an understanding of the unionist position and they had been reasonably encouraged by the private response from unionists. Mason replied that "speeches on Irish unity frightened the unionists and

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undermined the Irish government's own long-term aim".

O'Kennedy said Irish unity was the only possible long-term basis for peace. His government was convinced that there could be no real move until the UK government accepted this and said so.

On the North, O'Kennedy felt that "the difficulty was to win respect from an element in society which had been consistently held down". The Fair Employment Report had shown the extent of the discrimination. "We must try to give a sense of confidence to this element or they would be a breeding-ground for trouble."

The secretary of state said there could be no declaration of intent on Irish unity from the British government. The violence in the North now came mainly from the IRA. Speeches on the goal of Irish unity could bring unionist leader Harry West and the Rev Ian Paisley together by frightening them. This would end any prospect for political progress.

At a full session of talks later involving officials from both sides, Mason said the political situation in the North was the constitutional responsibility of the UK government but it was right that Dublin should know how he saw it.

In the run-up to the meeting of Mason and O'Kennedy, the British believed that "Anglo-Irish relations are ironically the only area where the Irish government are enjoying any public success".

A telegram from the British ambassador in Dublin, Robin Haydon, suggested that the Lynch government's Northern Ireland policy has, "temporarily at least, struck a responsive chord, and become something of a national cause".


In the telegram, the ambassador complained that Irish officials had "been venting their spleen almost daily since January". He also claimed that the Irish were "putting it about that that the venue, agenda and even timing of Thursday's meeting represents concessions rung (sic) out of HMG" and they "assume, furthermore, that Mr Mason will be in a contrite mood".

It was predicted that O'Kennedy's "main aim will be to convince public opinion that he has refuted Mason's claims of 6 March", in which he claimed that the Irish were not being sufficiently helpful on the issue of security co-operation.

"In the present mood of angry and quite nauseating self-righteousness", it was also argued, "the Irish overlook the weakness of their own case".

For Britain's own part, Haydon advised that "while we have no interest in public recriminations, that does not preclude tough speaking in private". In keeping with this, it was recommended that Mason "should get in first on the security issue".

On May 24th, a meeting of senior officials at the Northern Ireland Office did conclude that Anglo Irish relations were on a better footing after the meeting, as O'Kennedy had reiterated his government's "100 per cent commitment on security".

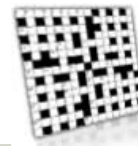
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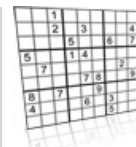
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