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**Reference Code:** 2005/7/631

**Title:** Report [?by D Nally, Department of the Taoiseach], on a meeting in Dublin on 10 June 1974 of the Minister for Finance Richie Ryan, Minister for Posts and Telegraphs Conor Cruise O'Brien and other ministers, with a deputation from the Social Democratic and Labour Party, discussing the prospect and consequences of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.

**Creation Date(s):** 11 June, 1974

**Level of description:** Item

**Extent and medium:** 4 pages

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

**Access Conditions:** Open

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MEETING WITH S.D.L.P. DELEGATION, 10th JUNE, 1974

1. The Minister for Finance, the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, the Minister for Education and the Attorney General met a deputation yesterday from the S.D.L.P., consisting of Messrs. Devlin, Currie and O'Hanlon.
2. The meeting was also attended by Messrs. Nally, MacConghail and Kirwan of the Department of the Taoiseach, and Mr. Donlon of the Department of Foreign Affairs.
3. Mr. Devlin in conversation before the meeting began said that he was convinced that the British intended to pull out of Northern Ireland. There was a "smell of it there" he said that, so far as the S.D.L.P. were concerned it was essential for them to develop the middle ground and to try to maintain the 1973 Constitution Act. The alternative to this was a drift into a one party State - a no hope situation - so far as they were concerned. This could well happen after an election when the Loyalist groupings could go for a unilateral declaration of independence. The major hope they had at present was that the British would be able to get across to the population in the North the effect on them of the withdrawal of British subsidies. Mr. Devlin speculated shortly on whether it would be worthwhile for the British, in order to get this point across sharply, to withhold subsidies to, for example, the ship yards or to stop, for a short time, giving orders to Short Brothers and Harland. There were grave risks in this policy and if it were adopted it would have to be managed with great care. He emphasised that what the people of Northern Ireland wanted - and what was a major plank in the S.D.L.P. platform - was peace.
4. When the meeting began, formally, Mr. Devlin repeated again his understanding of the British wish to pull-out of Northern Ireland and its apparent inevitability. He said that General King had produced an estimate sometime ago that it would require an Army of some 50 to 60 thousand frontline troops, with supporting staff etc., to confront the protestant population. This estimate had been produced before the recent Loyalist strike and would doubtless be higher now. The S.D.L.P. were pushing the idea of a partnership in Government through power-sharing, and a partnership with the South through whatever institutions or arrangements might be negotiated.

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5. Mr. O'Hanlon said that there was a possibility that there might not be Assembly elections - though he would not be sure on this. There seemed, however, to be some likelihood of Westminster elections in October. They preferred to think of the Westminster elections taking place before Assembly elections since if they took place afterwards the same thing could happen as had happened before. In other words the result of the Westminster elections, held on the direct vote system, could be used to challenge whatever emerged under the proportional representation system, in the Assembly elections. If the Westminster elections last February had been held according to the system of proportional representation the parties committed to power sharing would have won 6 out of the 12 seats.
6. The SDLP delegation were asked if they would accept power-sharing without the Irish dimension - in order that power-sharing should exist in Northern Ireland. They were emphatic in their rejection of this possibility. They said that they would not give up their aspirations in order to take part in a power-sharing administration. They were aware of the consequences - which might be involuntary repartition in a UDI situation - which could involve massive hardship. They regarded either a federal solution or Irish unity as "outside runners".
7. The Minister for Posts and Telegraphs asked the delegation -
- (1) if they had any ideas on the time-scale for a withdrawal and
  - (2) what they thought we could do here to be helpful.
8. Mr. Devlin said that he was convinced that Ministers in Westminster had agreed in principle to the idea of withdrawal and that the only question now was one of time. A sudden withdrawal could affect something like 65,000 to 70,000 families living outside ghetto areas. These families consisted of something like 200,000 people. They were now protected by the British army. The UVF would, in all probability, try to get them out of their homes and neighbourhoods in the event of a withdrawal. This was a possibility which, Mr. Devlin thought, the British would be most likely to attempt to deal with - when they were deciding on the timing for their withdrawal. He could not say the degree of success likely to attend their efforts.
9. The second thing they would probably attempt to do before withdrawing would be to set up some type of institution for Government or administration in their wake. For this reason, he thought that it was likely that they would hold some form of election so as to enable a representative Government and opposition to emerge.
10. Mr. Currie, who came late to the meeting, said that the prime aim of SDLP policy now must be to find some way of splitting up the monolithic loyalist grouping. There were the ingredients for a split readily at hand in the sort of triumvirate leading the Loyalists at present. Messrs. West, Paisley and Craig were not the easiest bed-fellows. In addition, a number of the people on the Ulster Workers' Council - like Glen Barr - had strong political ambitions. They saw themselves as leaders.
11. He was not precise as to the line of action he saw being followed by the Irish Government. The British Government

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- should spell out the facts of life - both in regard to security and finance - to the population of Northern Ireland. These included the fact that the electorate there, ~~represented~~ voting for the Loyalists, represented some 1% of the total electorate of the United Kingdom. This electorate could not dominate the remainder of the United Kingdom and must be told this in no uncertain terms.
12. He said that, insofar as the SDLP were concerned, it seemed to them that the effect of claims or at attempts at intervention by the Irish Government would only be to solidify Loyalist opinion in its present attitudes. This would be directly contrary to what the SDLP wanted. If it were not possible to split Loyalist opinion ~~with~~ sufficient extent, the possibility of ~~an~~ early British withdrawal became very much greater. Mr. Devlin said that there was a strong possibility that withdrawal could be an issue in the next Westminster election. He thought that the British politicians might well be under-estimating - or at least under-stating - the degree of support at grass roots within their own constituencies for the idea of withdrawal.
13. He said that so far as the Irish Government ~~was~~ concerned he thought that the proper policy would be to emphasise partnership and to carry out the remaining Sunningdale commitments.
14. ~~The~~ Economic disaster ~~which~~ would follow if there were no power-sharing administration. This point should be rubbed home again and again. Mr. Currie said that the alternative to power-sharing was a Protestant Parliament for a Protestant people. In this sort of a situation the "defenders of the people" would come into their own. In fact, he thought that if there were an election tomorrow the result, so far as the SDLP were concerned, could well be that the electorate would hold that the "defenders" were right. They could well say that democracy and democratic methods had failed and that the only way of getting what they wanted was the provisional way.
15. Mr. Devlin said that the Irish Government could help by pushing Westminster in the right direction - not to do anything foolish. During their conversations with Mr. Wilson over the past week the question of a meeting between him and the Taoiseach had been raised. Mr. Wilson seemed to be receptive to the idea. He gave the impression that he would like to discuss the options.
16. Mr. Currie said that it was important to emphasise that in the event of a withdrawal the minority could rely on protection from no one. Both the RUC and the Ulster Defence Regiment were unreliable, to say the least, for this purpose. In fact he knew of two or three business or professional people who were moving already - obviously anticipating what could well happen. We would need to be particularly careful, in our contingency planning, on the question of -
- (1) refugees
  - (2) the emotional reaction here and
  - (3) United Nations involvement.

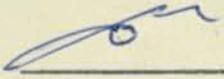
There might well not be a sufficient understanding of the lack of control on the part of the minority population of the effects of an economic stranglehold - exercised through

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through cutting off electricity, water, sewerage pumping stations etc. In some areas there might be a possibility of holding out militarily but in the event of this type of economic stranglehold then a military convention just was to no purpose. Mr. O'Hanlon emphasised the strong possibility of a number of areas seceding in the event of a British withdrawal - and was fully conscious of the effect of economic sanctions which could be used against these areas. He mentioned that the Government here might press the question of a hydro-electric scheme in South Armagh (Camlowk). This would provide some generating capacity in a minor area. The scheme which it had been intended to provide there was now being built near Kilroot, in the heart of Loyalist territory in Antrim. He emphasised again that in the event of a withdrawal the urge to create a Protestant State in the North would be quite over-powering. If this happened, then there was a strong likelihood that the IRA would attempt to take over large areas "as defenders of the people". In this sort of operation the Official IRA who had a greater political consciousness and had kept out of the fighting so far, would be far better placed than the Provisional IRA, who were now without strong leadership or much understanding of the facts of life.

17. The meeting then concluded.

  
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11th June 1974