

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2009/135/710
Creation Date(s):	[25] June 1979
Extent and medium:	10 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
Access Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

CONFIDENTIAL

Uimhir.....

Report of Meeting between members of the Government and Representatives of the SDLP

1. The Taoiseach, accompanied by the Tánaiste, the Minister for Tourism and Transport and the Minister for Economic Planning and Development met a deputation from the SDLP in the Council Chamber, Government Buildings at 4.15 p.m. on Monday the 25th June, 1979. The composition of the SDLP delegation was as follows:- Mrs. B. Rodgers, Messrs. John Hume, Seamus Mallon, Michael Canavan and D. MacAreavy, General Secretary. Officials present were Messrs. D. Neligan and S. O hUiginn, Department of Foreign Affairs and Messrs. D. Nally and F. Murray, Department of the Taoiseach.

2. The Taoiseach in welcoming the delegation, formally congratulated Mr. Hume on his success in the recent European elections. Since the British General Election there have been some contacts with the new Government and he himself had paid a courtesy call on the British Prime Minister in the course of his visit to London to attend a legal dinner on the 10th May. The Prime Minister had indicated to him on that occasion that she would like time to allow the new British Secretary of State in Northern Ireland and indeed herself also to get a fuller knowledge of the whole Northern Ireland situation. The Taoiseach also indicated that the Minister for Foreign Affairs hoped to have a meeting soon with the new Northern Ireland Secretary of State.

3. Mr. Hume said that the SDLP had had a meeting with Mr. Atkins and that it had been largely a listening exercise on his part. At that meeting Mr. Atkins had enquired from the SDLP as to what guarantees they would seek if additional powers were to be restored to local authorities. The SDLP delegation referred to the abuses which had taken place in the past prior to the Compton Report and the Macrory Review. They pointed out that there was no local authority in Northern Ireland in which the Unionists had overall control practising

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 2 -

powersharing. Paisley's victory had sectarian overtones and in their view showed that there was need for genuine dialogue between the Unionists and the rest of the people on this island. The SDLP view was that Britain should change its policy so as to bring both sides together. They were not asking Britain to withdraw, simpliciter, but to join the ranks of those who sought to persuade the Unionists to alter their present attitude. Mr. Hume referred to a private meeting which they had with Mr. Atkins last week in which he said that his strategy would be to ask each of the main parties to make a "concession" to improve the political atmosphere. The concession sought from the SDLP was that party representatives would join the police liaison committees and that they should use their influence to get the U.S. and Dublin to "shut up" on Northern Ireland. They were asked to take this "package" back to the Party and to come back to Mr. Atkins with a reaction in due course. It is obvious Mr. Hume said that pressure from the U.S. and Dublin was having some effect. In their view this pressure should continue.

4. The Minister for Tourism and Transport enquired as to whether the SDLP delegation had received any indication of the concession which Mr. Atkins was currently seeking from the Unionist side. Mr. Hume replied that they had not been told anything about this. Continuing, he said that in their view pressure on the British Government to change its policy on Northern Ireland should be continued. To date that policy has been one of backing up the Unionists. It had failed to produce any form of settlement and there was now a strong case for changing it. In reference to the constitutional guarantees to the Unionists Mr. Hume expressed the view that it is not the Union that the British were now underwriting. In effect they were protecting a sectarian position. In reply

/.....

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 3 -

to a query from the Taoiseach Mr. Hume said that they did not agree with the British view that comments from outside on the Northern Ireland situation were "unhelpful". They were of the view that Unionists do not need anything to solidify them. Until they stand on their own feet no negotiation was possible.

5. The Taoiseach referred to his various meetings with the former British Prime Minister, Mr. Callaghan and to their agreement to disagree on the unity question. The Government here would continue its policy of seeking to change the attitude of the British Government in this regard. Commenting on the situation in Northern Ireland generally Mr. Hume said that it was deteriorating at present. There were a number of ominous signs including Paisley's recent statements and the fact that the sectarian murder campaign has been re-opened. In the past sectarian assassinations had coincided with inflammatory type statements from Paisley.

6. Mr. Seamus Mallon said that he held the view that there was no future in seeking a solution in a Northern Ireland context. Such a solution could only succeed if there was a Unionist leader who was prepared to work it through. This was not the case at present. An administration in a Northern Ireland context could not sustain itself. He would go as far as saying that it would not be possible to get a mandate for it in the first place. He said he was convinced that there was no solution until the problem was moved into a wider context. There was no political movement in Northern Ireland at present and Paisley's position had recently been reinforced. He said that the SDLP recently had soundings from the British on the possibility of a new convention. He felt that this would have no chance of success. The British Government would not in his view lay down the parameters necessary for a successful outcome to such a convention. The British approach was very nationalistic, in a U.K. sense, at present and it was likely that they would continue this nationalistic/unionist

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 4 -

line until they made a serious mistake when they might then alter their stance. The more pressure that could be put on Britain to alter its present policy the better.

7. In reply to a query from the Taoiseach in relation to the desirability of seeking agreed structures in Northern Ireland Mr. Mallon said that they would have to get this but that the context in which agreed structures would be discussed was very important. Insofar as implementation of full powersharing was concerned the current security situation was a crux. The existing penal system in Northern Ireland was creating awful problems. There would be alienation from any Northern Ireland administration in the light of security and employment problems. Insofar as another Northern Ireland convention was concerned they would be very wary of this where the parameters were not clearly laid down by Britain in advance.

8. The Taoiseach enquired as to whether the delegation saw any prospect of influencing official unionists' attitudes away from the current hard line. Mr. Mallon in reply said that the more the Unionists tend to go towards the hard line the more impossible the situation becomes. They could not hope to "out Paisley", Paisley. They would do themselves further harm if they attempted this and in his view the way they should go would be back to the middle ground. However the difficulty of making a rational thing out of Unionism remained. Mr. Canavan expressed the view that not all official unionists are, in effect, Paisleities. At present they were caught in a situation where they were forced to follow the road they had been on. They could either move towards Paisley's position or towards the line advocated by the SDLP. They were faced with the situation where the British Government would continue with direct rule. Insofar as the SDLP were concerned a radical approach was needed.

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 5 -

A concerted approach from all the political groups in Northern Ireland was necessary to change existing British policy. Since the date of the delegation's previous meeting with the Government (15 December, 1978) they had been proved right in relation to two items mentioned on that occasion. One was the British "kill don't question" policy. A British soldier had been charged in the Boyle case. The other matter related to allegations against the R.U.C. The Bennett Report had vindicated what they had said in this context. They were all of the view that the Northern Ireland Secretary of State wanted to strengthen security arrangements with the Irish Government. Security policy alone was not enough. There would have to be political developments also and he would urge that any transgression by Britain in the field of security or human rights should be tackled by the Irish Government.

9. In reference to the Paisley "bogies" Mr. Hume said that the only time they had got any movement from the Unionists was when Heath laid it on the line. There was an urgency in getting some movement now. As far as the SDLP was concerned they were faced with the dilemma that they were neither in Government nor in opposition. They had nothing to offer the people who voted for them and it would be difficult to sustain the support which they had received and maintained to date. Mr. Mallon thought that if they were to wait for a British initiative to solve the problem "they would be waiting until doom's day".

10. The Tanaiste in reference to Mr. Mallon's assessment of the attitude of the British Government agreed that they would have to go through an education process before there would be a major change of attitude on their part. Assuming that this took place and that they then joined in the movement to bring all together it seemed that the British Government would have little option but to go for some

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 6 -

form of power sharing. He asked if the British Government actively pursued this could the SDLP get a mandate for it in Northern Ireland. In reply Mr. Mallon said that in a new context where the Irish Government was involved he would see some hope for success. However, in the British context with the H Block, Remand, Bennett Report and economic problems the situation would be altogether different.

11. The Taoiseach enquired from the SDLP delegation if he was correct in assuming that they were not seeking any changes of policy from the Government here but rather that existing policy should be pursued vigorously. Mr. Hume in reply agreed with this line and expressed the view that there was probably a better chance of success with the Tories. Lack of consensus was causing the law to be turned up side down in Northern Ireland. The Tories had indicated that they were not going to support lame ducks. He was of the view that this type of thinking would apply also in the field of Northern Ireland politics. From the SDLP point of view they could not be seen to be closing doors. In reply to a question from the Minister for Tourism and Transport Mr. Hume indicated that a reasonable solution would be acceptable to the SDLP in the short-term. Mr. Mallon expressed the view in this regard that they could not afford to dwell unduly long on a pro tem solution and allow the long-term solution to go by default. This was a dilemma which faced the Party. The Minister for Tourism and Transport expressed the view that as Mrs. Thatcher was of an obviously imperialistic frame of mind it could take a long time to influence her towards accepting the United Ireland idea. In reply Mr. Hume said that there were people in the Cabinet who would be disposed in our favour, such as Lord Carrington, Lord Hailsham and Mr. Walker. [Privately he expressed the view that it would be worthwhile "working on these"]

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 7 -

12. Mrs. Rodgers expressed the view that the British Government would react to World opinion. She referred in particular to the statements by Speaker O'Neill. The SDLP policy was one of seeking to heal divisions on this island. If we had a common approach from all parties in the country it could not be ignored. The Minister for Economic Planning and Development referred to the recently announced British expenditure cut-backs. On these Mr. Hume said that they were going to have serious effects among SDLP supporters. In particular the youth employment cuts would adversely affect the minority community. Mr. Mallon referred to the comparison in the case of expenditure on security which was increasing. Mr. Hume mentioned that there were now 20,000 civilians employed in the security field. Mr. Canavan expressed the view that schemes to attract support for an all-Ireland dimension will themselves have a security dimension in future.

13. The Taoiseach referred to the volume of opinion here which advocated the greater degree of economic co-operation in Northern Ireland. Mr. Hume expressed the view that people who live in border counties will not turn up their noses at schemes such as border drainage proposals, the West of Ireland package etc. While the Paisly attitude would, as expected, be negative in this regard the realistic benefits which such policies involve could not be easily ignored. Commenting on the illogicality of the DUP position Mr. Hume mentioned that they even attacked the official unionists in Derry because of the fact that the O.U. Party accepted the position of Mayor in rotation. In reply to a query from the Taoiseach, Mr. Hume agreed that there would be "no cheque-book tour" by the new Northern Ireland Secretary of State in the United States as had been the case with Mr. Mason.

14. The Minister for Economic Planning and Development referred to the current range of North/South studies. Progress

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 8 -

on these have been held up temporarily because of the British General Election. There was some discussion on the desirability of industrial estates in border areas. The SDLP advocated the building of advance factories on one side of the border where there is a large unemployment problem on the other. In commenting on this the Minister for Tourism and Transport mentioned that the work permit situation had been one of the factors which prevented movement in this direction up to now. The Tánaiste expressed the view that the firms concerned in such ventures would probably prefer to have our tax concessions and on this account locate industries in advance factories on the Southern side. Mr. Hume accepted this viewpoint. He went on to refer to the possibility of a European economic initiative and suggested that the Irish Government should ask the EEC to take such an initiative during the term of the Irish Presidency. In Europe generally he felt that everyone wants to help towards solving Northern Ireland's problems but at the same time nobody wishes to get their fingers burned. He would see major advantages in a European economic initiative for the North if such could be achieved as suggested.

15. The meeting went on to discuss the deteriorating security situation in Northern Ireland. The SDLP for their part were certain that the sectarian assassinations were starting again. They were particularly worried about the length of remands especially in the case of young people. There were cases where people were retained on demand for two to three years. The UDR for their part were becoming more aggressive in the light of the assassination campaign carried out by the IRA. The SDLP held the view that serious problems could arise in this regard. As to long remands, these were interpreted as a strategic form of internment. Mr. Canavan expressed the view that there was no longer an emergency in Northern Ireland in the conventional sense of that term. The emergency as such had in fact become a permanent situation. The best way to

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 9 -

circumvent this would be through a political solution. He was of the opinion that the longer the vacuum is left the more the North will be exposed to repressive legislation. Renewal of sectarian murders justifies the British in using harsher methods and this in turn leads to further deterioration of the overall situation. Mr. Hume commented on the fact that the newspapers in the Republic had not been reporting some of Paisley's more recent inflammatory speeches. Mr. Mallon said that a pattern appeared to be developing ^{that} where a member of the P.I.R.A. was caught another member of his family who would most likely not be a Provisional supporter would be shot by Protestant extremists. This tit-for-tat murder ritual arouses further sympathy for the P.I.R.A. campaigns. Mr. Rodgers referred to cases where people were lifted and held for 18 months on remand and where at the end of that time no additional evidence was added to the prosecution file. There was no justification for holding persons in this way.

16. The Taoiseach in commenting on what the SDLP representatives said stated that if the Irish Government made representations to the British Government re emergency legislation the British would be likely to refer to the fact that we operated special courts here. This was accepted by the delegation. However, Mr. Hume pointed out that lack of political consensus in Northern Ireland was the reason for the current problems there. The fact that we had to operate the special criminal court, the Taoiseach said, arose because of the reaction here to the situation in the North.

17. Commenting on the Bennett Report Mr. Canavan said that the SDLP would like to see further attention paid in this context to the outcome of the Strasbourg case. He felt that Britain could be further embarrassed in this regard. This should be pointed out to them privately and if necessary publicly. On this the Taoiseach said that on the last occasion when we had gone to the European Court of Human Rights

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

- 10 -

we gathered our own evidence. Whether this could be done again was a matter for consideration. There was, of course, always the possibility of an individual taking his/her own case to that Court.

18. Mr. Hume, in his concluding remarks, expressed the view that Britain were becoming victims of their own propaganda insofar as Northern Ireland was concerned. He thought that the present Government might face up to the resolution of the problem if they were pressed sufficiently hard. Mr. Mallon referred briefly to the deteriorating security situation, the adverse economic situation, the unsatisfactory legal process and urged that efforts be made to mentally condition the British Government towards a change of overall policy. If sufficient pressure from here were applied publicly, if necessary it would, in their view, be effective. The Minister for Economic Planning and Development referred to the difficulties for the British Government if they were to "give on Northern Ireland" in the context of devolution for Scotland and Wales. There was also the argument, for what it is worth, that withdrawal from Northern Ireland would weaken the NATO security position.

19. It was agreed that insofar as the media were concerned they should be told that the meeting had taken place and that both sides have discussed the situation in Northern Ireland following the recent U.K. General Election and the EURO election. The meeting adjourned at approximately 5.30 p.m.