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Report of Meeting Between the Minister for Foreign Affairs,
Mr. Michael O'Kennedy T.D., and the Secretary of State for
Northern Ireland, Mr. Roy Mason, M.P. London, 14 February 1979

1. After an initial exchange of courtesies Mr. Mason suggested that the meeting might follow the usual pattern and take as its agenda political, security and economic matters in that order. This was accepted.

Political Situation

2. In regard to the political situation Mr. Mason said that the basic aim of the British Government was still to try to get a devolved government in Northern Ireland. His five-point plan was before the political parties. It was not hard and fast in relation to details but represented the Government's general intention. He wished to emphasise that he had no intention of re-shaping local government in Northern Ireland. Any introduction of a British-style local government regime in Northern Ireland would be Unionist dominated and a backward step. He was not weakening on his position that any scheme should pass the test of acceptability as regards the four Northern parties and the House of Commons. Neither were any steps being taken towards integration. The maintenance of a separate financial structure, a separate civil service and a separate statute book for Northern Ireland demonstrated this. There has been some movement. In the last twelve months the Official Unionists had backed away from their demands for implementation of the Convention Report and would now accept something less. He had recently had an exchange of letters with the Official Unionists who now agreed to come forward and discuss amendments to the plan. He had met a delegation from the Democratic Unionist Party on security matters and they had reiterated their desire to discuss the five-point plan. He had also had discussions with the NILP and UPNI. If the other three main parties entered discussions he hoped the SDLP would do so also. He felt that it would be in their own interests to be involved in a political dialogue concerning partnership at the time of the election since otherwise if the Tories came in they would be all the more tempted to move to a restructuring of local government. He felt that Mr. Fitt had over-reacted to Mr. Mason's broadcast which seemed to imply that the SDLP were extremists. These remarks had been taken out of context.

3. Mr. Mason said he was not opposed to the SDLP keeping alive their aspiration for Irish unity. They should however show that they could provide leadership to their community for to-day and not merely in relation to the distant prospect of Irish unity. Any emphasis on Irish unity or their New Ireland campaign made it more difficult to get compromise from the Official Unionists on a plan which, if implemented, would restore to the local level in Northern Ireland almost all the powers exercised in Stormont.

4. Mr. Mason listed the efforts which he had made on behalf of the Northern minority in the last twelve months. He had piloted a Bill through the Cabinet which made it possible for John Hume to win a seat in the European election. He had agreed a major housing development in Poleglass. He had secured the De Lorean car plant which would ensure 2,000 jobs in a minority area. In spite of a court judgement which implied the GAA were guilty of discrimination he had nevertheless agreed to continue payment of substantial grants to GAA clubs. Mr. Mason hoped that the SDLP could eventually come to appreciate that these were positive efforts.

5. In relation to the Irish Government's policy of promoting Irish unity, Mr. Mason said that he and the Minister would have to agree to disagree on this issue as the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister had done. Even a hint in this direction by the British Government would destroy any possibility of devolution by feeding Protestant fears and reversing the trend of separating the Official Unionists from Paisley and isolating the latter. To press forward on unity now would destroy any policy of devolution but the reverse was not true.

6. Mr. Mason said he appreciated that the extra Westminster seats had caused concern among the minority. Once it had been decided that the representation of Scotland and Wales should not be reduced after devolution an increase in Northern Ireland representation became an inevitable act of justice. He believed that four or five of the prospective 17 seats would go to anti-unionists. The SDLP should grasp the opportunity of establishing a presence at Westminster and using that platform to further their aims.

Mr. Mason emphasised that ^{there} was no pact between the Labour Government and the Official Unionists. At no time had the Government been maintained in office by the OUP and their vote against pay sanctions had proved a severe embarrassment to the Government.

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*They said
abstain
in the hall
conscience vote*

7. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said he appreciated that the two Governments had a common interest in bringing about normal politics in Northern Ireland. The Irish Government's concept of normality was however something very different from the situation which had obtained under Stormont. The Minister said that he welcomed Mr. Mason's assurance that there was no policy of integration and no intention of return to Unionist-dominated local government in Northern Ireland. When they had met in Downing Street in September 1977 it had been too early to assess Mr. Mason's five-point plan. From the reactions over the long intervening period, one had to accept that the plan, however reasonable in itself, failed even on its own stated term of acceptability. Without wishing to query Mr. Mason's possibly more up-to-date assessment of the Official Unionist position, the Minister said that he would not have thought that the OUP were enthusiastic and neither were the SDLP.

8. The Minister said that while there might well be no policy of integration the fact remained that if the perception of the matter was different in Northern Ireland that was a political reality in itself. Any appearance of a lack of even-handedness as between the two communities made compromise and political progress more difficult. It was fair to say that by and large direct rule was more acceptable to the Unionists than to the Nationalists population. The concession of extra seats had heightened this perception of imbalance and, whatever the background to it, Mr. Mason would have great difficulty in convincing people in Northern Ireland that it was not a concession to the Powell lobby. From what one could judge from statements from the DUP and different elements of the OUP, the SDLP were not alone in regarding political progress as next to impossible on the basis of the five-point plan. Mr. Mason had referred to movement on the part of the OUP on the grounds they had moved away from the extreme position they had adopted in relation to the Convention Report. The Minister said he frankly had to confess that he did not see much evidence of this movement. The balance as between the two communities which might have helped to stimulate it had been upset.

9. The Minister said the Irish Government wished to move away from the sectarian politics which had obtained in Northern Ireland over the last 50 years. They would have no wish to undermine any effort to secure justice, equity and participation for the minority in the short-term. But unless an attempt was made to look at long-term aspects even these short-term objectives could be defeated. There was a political vacuum in Northern Ireland which deprived people of the opportunity to better themselves and of the dignity involved in that process. The SDLP had shown great courage in maintaining their position even on difficult issues such as the H-Block question. If they were made irrelevant they could be superseded only by a more extreme group, involving greater dangers of confrontation. The Minister said that he did not expect a political initiative before the British general election. However, there were realities which had to be recognised and he hoped this would be done after the election.

10. One of the most important such realities related to economic developments in the South. When he had become involved with the Northern question about 1965 the disparity in the level of economic development North and South was held to be a major barrier to overcoming the division. Any North-South comparison in terms of industrial growth, level of industrial earnings, or unemployment figures would show that this situation was now totally changed. Unionist farmers could see the advantages of policies oriented towards agricultural rather than consumer interests. In spite of all its resources the Northern Ireland Office could not solve the economic problems of Northern Ireland unless they gave the people of Northern Ireland the capacity to guarantee their own support. This process should be encouraged. Cross-border and economic co-operation could only be helpful. It should be supported both by Governments and by the EEC. Bargaining such as had occurred in the De Lorean case could only benefit the multi-nationals. The Irish industrial promotion and export promotion agencies were extremely sophisticated and could make a very valuable contribution to all-Ireland promotions.

1. On the political level the Irish Government accepted that the pace of progress could only be the pace of consent, but saw no contradiction between the principle of consensus and providing leadership and encouragement to people to come together. From his involvement in Europe, the Minister felt confident that such a process would be supported and encouraged by the other members of the Community. There was a need to encourage further co-operation. A change in Unionist attitudes such as Mr. Mason had referred to would indeed be welcome but the OUP reaction to Poleglass or the positions taken by spokesmen such as John Taylor gave little grounds for hope. The Irish Government would prefer Mr. Mason not to rely so heavily on the five-point plan as the way forward but to research other possibilities of progress.

12. Mr. Mason said that when he spoke of returning to normality he did not mean a return to Stormont. Surveys had shown there was no ground-swell in the minority community against direct rule. The allegation that he thought of the OUP as moderate had come about because he had wished to point up for a British audience the difference between the OUP and the DUP. He felt that if the five-point plan was worked sectarian politics could become irrelevant. He had always stressed that the SDLP was a party which should be maintained. The Republican Clubs were however having some impact in working class areas and Alliance were making gains as was shown by a recent by-election in Derry. It was bad for the SDLP to be isolated and his initiative offered them a way out.

13. Mr. Mason said he did not consider that the difference in wealth levels between North and South was now used as an argument by Unionists. As regards the economic situation in Northern Ireland he had turned the tide in relation to outside investment and 3,500 jobs were now in the pipeline. While wages might be higher in the South so was the cost of living. Farmers in Northern Ireland were supported by things such as the MIES so that both Northern farmers and consumers benefitted. As regards competition for overseas investment the reality was that Ireland was divided and the two peoples had decreed it should operate in separate units. The present process of cross-border co-operation was blurring the lines. This was the way to proceed and any major jump in terms of Irish unity would simply compromise this process.

14. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that without discussing the question whether or not the peoples decreed the division of Ireland things were now totally changed since the decision was made. The long catalogue of people from O'Neill onwards who had all been made irrelevant by the extremism of Unionist politics would scarcely agree that the OUP were moderates, and it was not helpful to progress to convey the impression that they were. The Irish Government did not expect political initiatives now but they did hope there would be new thinking in both parties in Britain. Bi-partisanship was of no value if it excluded new thinking.

15. Mr. Mason said that Northern Ireland affairs were now debated more and got more coverage in the House of Commons than in previous years. He did not know when the Fianna Fáil and Fianna Gael background studies were likely to be published but Ian Mikardo and others in the British Labour Party had also been involved in a study and when Airey Neave spoke it was probably on the basis of discussions and decisions in the Shadow Cabinet. It was not fair to say that there was no thinking being devoted to Northern Ireland. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that if the opportunity arose to present ideas to people around the table it would be seen that the Fianna Fáil back-up group had done a very detailed amount of background work in relation to constitutional, legal, social and economic implications.

16. Mr. Mason then suggested a brief discussion on Irish-American involvement. The Taoiseach and the Minister had been very helpful in relation to Biaggi and similar developments. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that his latest information did not indicate any progress towards congressional hearings. The Irish Government were opposed to such hearings and had been anxious that the Americans should at all times maintain a distinction between elected representatives and people like O Bradaigh who had no mandate whatever although misleadingly described as 'prominent political leaders'. The Minister said that when he had taken up office he had travelled to the U.S. He had emphasised to Irish-Americans the overwhelming mandate of the Government. They had received very strong and consistent support from Irish-American leaders like Tip O'Neill who had made great efforts to convince Irish-Americans that they should support the position of the Irish Government. These leaders had held their position with the

patience of strong men but their stance was being somewhat undermined by the H-Block campaign. Mr. Mason again paid tribute to the work done by the Minister and the Taoiseach in undermining support for violence among Irish-Americans. He thought that Biaggi's initiative was running into the sands. He had met the ad hoc committee in the United States and had been alarmed at their lack of information about realities in Ireland.

Security

17. The meeting then discussed security aspects. Mr. Mason said there had been an increase in the activities of the Provisional IRA towards the end of last year. It had been a well coordinated attack but it was significant that none of the towns involved had decided to put barriers up again. Mr. Mason said that he was particularly worried at the possibility of a backlash from Protestant paramilitaries. This had nearly happened on the occasion of La Mon and he always had to make an effort to keep the temperature down. Good progress was being made in Garda/RUC co-operation. This had virtually shut off supplies of commercial explosives and most explosives being used were now of the homemade variety. The joint committee was functioning, superintendents along the border were getting to know each other and this co-operation should be supported and developed in every way. There had been some worry about rails over the border but co-operation was good. For example the occasion on which the Garda stopped five armed IRA men fleeing back into Donegal had been very helpful in terms of public opinion in Northern Ireland. He felt the meeting should reaffirm their joint political backing for this police co-operation.

18. Mr. Mason said that the Maze Prison was the only propaganda cause which the IRA had left. Only one-third of the prisoners in the Maze were protesting. As many Republican prisoners were conforming as were on protest. Some came off the blanket, some came off the dirty campaign, so that there were fluctuations, but the figure remained at around 340. There was no public backing in Northern Ireland for the protest. A protest march last week had mustered no more than 200 people. Mr. Mason said he had tried to meet this propaganda campaign by having explanatory leaflets prepared. There was no intention to restore special category status and he would not back down on this issue. If he did so the next demand would be amnesty. The Board of Visitors, which was

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dependent, had made no complaint about conditions in the Maze. It was important to publicise the facilities which were available to visitors who conformed to prison regulations. These included eight letters per month, four visits per month, four parcels per month, non-prison clothing for visits, for exercise and recreation periods, three hours recreation and one hour of outdoor exercise per evening, sports facilities etc. Newspapers and paperbacks had been made available to the protesting prisoners in the passages to and from the visiting area. They were not however being availed of. Prisoners with a sentence of over two years were allowed their own radio in their cells. If they were on a first sentence they were considered for five days leave at Christmas. They had the possibility of 50% remission of sentence. Training facilities were excellent and enabled prisoners to leave prison with full vocational qualifications.

19. In relation to Crossmaglen, Mr. Mason said that in spite of severe weather the wall in question was now built. One hundred tons of rubble had been removed from the area behind the goal-post and the Secretary of the local GAA club, who was also a contractor, had received the contract to remove the rest. Mr. Mason said that he hoped that once the disagreement with the Army was overcome the way would be open to him to enable the GAA club to avail of the grants which were available to develop their facilities.

20. Mr. Mason said that although RUC/Garda telephone communications were good it could nevertheless be helpful in certain circumstances if Army-to-Army contract could be established. This would avoid things like the Drummuckavall incident. He appreciated that there were difficulties in relation to this question but he would like to leave the idea with the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

21. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that both sides could report progress in relation to security matters. It had been a beneficial result of the May meeting that there had been no further public misunderstandings on this issue. If there was scope for improvement in security co-operation the Government would certainly want to examine this. The best way to approach the matter was through the people responsible who had practical expertise on the ground. If they saw room for improvement the Minister felt sure that the Minister for Justice, and the Government generally, would want

to examine this. Contacts in relation to the people recently arrested on the Greek/Turkish border showed the Government's attitude was very positive in this regard. Army-to-Army contact was however a different matter. The Irish Army could function only as an aid to the civil power. Furthermore any such move could have a very adverse effect on police morale. As regards the Drummuckavall incident, the Irish Army must surely be clearly identifiable and incidents like this should not arise. It should be clear that neither Army had the authority to fire into the other jurisdiction.

22. In relation to the H-Block situation the Minister emphasised that the Irish Government had never made any suggestion in favour of special category or political status. The Irish Government would withstand any pressure to do so in relation to prisons in the South. The Minister thanked British officials for their quick response in relation to enquiries relating to matters raised in the Dáil. He pointed out that he was the more likely of the two Ministers to be questioned on the H-Block issue at short notice and it was important that he was not left in an exposed position in the Dáil in relation to developments. The Government were on common ground with the British Government on the question of principle. The incidentals were perhaps a different matter. The present stance of the British Government left them exposed to being attacked on some of the incidentals. Many of the prisoners involved were very young. The degrading and indeed animal conditions in which some of these young people lived was a highly emotive issue and the humanitarian aspects gave cause for concern to many well-meaning people. Anything which could defuse the H-Block protest would undermine what propaganda material the Provisionals had left. Developments such as that in relation to availability of reading matter should be known more widely. If something such as the introduction of non-prison clothing for all prisoners could shake off the hold which the 'Godfathers' had on these young people it would be very helpful. The evidence that a prisoner had suffered a three stone weight loss was very worrying, since it pointed to a possibility of serious deterioration in the general condition of the prisoners.

3. Mr. Mason said that he understood there was an agreement that if either Army was fired upon it could return fire across the border. (The Irish side denied that it had ever accepted this proposition). He said there would be no change in relation to special category status. In spite of newspaper rumours there had not been and would not be any talks with the Provisionals. He himself had not known about the illness of the prisoner in question, and that was because it was not serious. He did not pretend to understand why the Minister was exposed to questions in relation to an area outside his control. However medical surveillance was very thorough. Prisoners were shaved and bathed on medical advice. There was no deterioration in the condition of the prisoners.

24. The Minister for Foreign Affairs asked if he could have an assurance that the protesting prisoners were not subject to ill-treatment. Mr. Mason said if there had been any ill-treatment the Board of Visitors, which was an independent body, would have reported it to him. The dirty protest was not really about prison rules. Newspapers and books had been introduced since some priests had complained about the lack of mental stimulus for the protesting prisoners. One prisoner had taken one book and returned it the next day, clearly under the effect of pressure. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said it was interesting to learn that a number of prisoners had come off the protest in the past two or three weeks. He inquired whether there were any statistics on this. The British side agreed to look into it and pass on figures if these were available. The Minister for Foreign Affairs referred to the statement made by Mr. Clement Freud after his visit to Long Kesh and inquired whether there had been any approach by Mr. Freud in relation to cases of ill-treatment. Mr. Mason said there had been no inquiries from Mr. Freud.

25. In relation to Crossmaglen the Minister for Foreign Affairs referred to the very sharp letters which he had received from the GAA because of lack of progress on the issue. He asked whether he might announce the recent developments in relation to clearing away rubble and asked for clarification in relation to a number of details. Mr. Mason saw no objection to making these developments public. They themselves had not made any statements on Crossmaglen. On the question of helicopter flights disturbing matches, Mr. Mason said it would be very helpful to get a fixture

list from the GAA in advance. He felt that allegations of harassment on the 10 and 12 December, last referred to by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, were probably flights during matches and this could be avoided with an advance fixture list.

26. The Minister for Foreign Affairs referred briefly to the remand question. It would be necessary to do everything possible to reduce the inordinate delays before people were brought to trial. He asked for clarification about certain of the measures which had been taken and said that at a minimum it would be important to be sure there was no likelihood that the length of the remand period was going to increase. The British side said that the numbers between first charge and committal had gone down. The bulge was between committal and trial. Delays were also caused by the fact that the defence insisted on having particular counsel. There was not much that could be done in relation to this. They could however assure the Minister that they were continuing their endeavours to reduce the remand period still further and procedures had already been instituted to this effect.

27. The Minister for Foreign Affairs referred to difficulties which arose from time to time in relation to the Irish community in Britain from an insensitive application of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA). Without wishing to go public on the matter he would like to be sure that every effort would be made to apply the provisions of the PTA with all due courtesy and sensitivity. Mr. Mason said that he would speak to the Home Secretary on this point.

28. The Minister for Foreign Affairs referred to the question of cross-border checkpoints and road-closures. He said that improvements at Aughnacloy had been greatly appreciated. There had been some complaints about the Derry/Donnegal road. The Kiltyclogher closure still imposed long detours on people in that area. There had also been complaints about road-closures in the Pettigo area. These were indeed the subject of a current parliamentary question. Mr. Mason said that he was not familiar on the up-to-date position but would look into the matter.

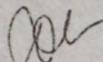
29. Because of pressure of time Mr. Mason said it would be necessary to draw the meeting to a close. He himself had not planned a press conference. He suggested a brief communique would be adequate. Economic co-operation aspects could be discussed over lunch. The Minister for Foreign Affairs reiterated the Government's belief that the lack of political progress could not be allowed to continue indefinitely. An effort would be necessary which would take account of changing realities on the political and economic level. The Irish Government was satisfied that its long-term perception of the problem was the right one and the only way to introduce normality in a real sense. There had been some apprehension among Unionists when the Government had come into office. That apprehension had diminished. The Government would be consistent in its determination to allay fears in Northern Ireland but there was no contradiction between this position and a desire to encourage parties in Northern Ireland on the road to political progress and to provide support and encouragement for people to come together. Mr. Mason said there were many ways in which progress had been made in relation to the ombudsman and many similar developments. An emphasis on Irish unity could only serve to unite the Official Unionists and the Paisleyites once more. It would destroy the present very useful process of cross-border co-operation. He felt that the Minister and he would have to differ on that point.

Economic Matters

30. Over lunch there was a brief exchange of views on cross-border economic co-operation. Mr. Mason listed the various areas where studies and contacts were taking place. He felt that this process was a most useful and constructive one. There was no doubt that it did to some extent blur the border but it did so in a way which did not create a backlash. The Minister for Foreign Affairs concurred in the importance which he attached to cross-border co-operation. This had been reflected in the meeting which the Taoiseach had with Mr. Callaghan in September 1977. On foot of that meeting officials had found a large number of areas where

their views on the possibilities of useful co-operation had coincided. The involvement of the European Community in this area was also very helpful and appropriate. Both Ministers looked forward to continuing contacts and further progress in this area.

31. A brief ^{13/1}communique, copy attached, was also agreed. G


Seán O hUiginn

6 February 1979