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Meeting with Dr A.T.Q. Stewart, 11 October 1983

I met in Belfast with Dr Stewart, who is Reader in Modern History at Queen's University, on 11 October. Dr Stewart, who is on the committee of the British Irish Association, is a staunch Unionist, though unconnected with any party. Among the points which he made were the following:

- British politicians increasingly seem to be distancing themselves from Unionists. This is especially true of Mr Prior and was very evident in his use of the term "as an Englishman" in his speech to the BIA Annual Conference at Oxford.
- This is naturally worrying to Unionists, who consider themselves kith and kin with the British.
- The English seem to look upon themselves as holding the ring between two different sets of Irishmen whom they see as essentially Irish rather than identifying themselves with the Unionist grouping. The English do not understand that the Unionists are British.
- He is very disillusioned with Mr Prior, whom he says has lost touch with everybody in Northern Ireland, including the Unionists and who seems dominated by bitterness because of being "demoted" to Northern Ireland by Mrs Thatcher.
- There has been a major change in Unionist attitudes. In 1914 had the British Government imposed Home Rule it would have resulted in civil war in Ireland. This is no longer the case. A British withdrawal would not result in civil war because Unionists feel divorced from England.
- The change is epitomised in the UVF. In 1914 they were supported by the aristocracy and by the men of industry. For example, Lord Dunleath's grandfather was one of those who supported them in 1914 whereas his grandson is an Alliance Party member. Where the UVF were once honoured defenders of the union they are now terrorists.
- Unionists have wished to retain the union not only for political and religious reasons but for economic reasons as well. Economically Northern Ireland was part of the Northern England Victorian expansion, which is now in severe depression. Were the South to become economically attractive to Unionists,

which is not difficult to envisage, their political objection to unity would decrease significantly.

- The supply of Kinsale Gas has political importance in this regard.
- The direction of movement is towards some form of a united Ireland. The logical alternative to it in the circumstances described above is not the union but an independent Northern Ireland (which would be widely accepted as having no viability).
- The passing of the eighth Constitutional Amendment will be used for polemical reasons by Unionists when it suits but it means nothing to the vast majority of Unionists who are unaware of events in the South.
- There has been an increase in anti-Catholic feeling within some sections of the Protestant community arising from the large vote for Sinn Féin in the Westminster elections and from the hunger strike. Deep down both communities are sectarian.

Doc

D. Ó Ceallaigh

13 October 1983

cc. - PSS ✓
PSeu
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