

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND

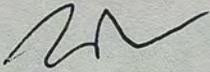


Reference Code:	2015/51/1378
Creation Date(s):	23 September 1985
Extent and medium:	9 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open
Copyright:	National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

S E C R E T

NOTE

The information which is contained in the attached report of a conversation with the DUP press officer is very sensitive. It is very important that its contents and the fact that there has been contact with Wilson should be kept absolutely secret. Any disclosure of this information could endanger the informant's life with possible risks for the Department official involved.



M.J. Lillis,

23 September 1985.

SECRET

Meeting with Sammy Wilson (DUP)

Belfast, 21 September 1985

As instructed, I met Sammy Wilson, a leading DUP member of Belfast City Council, in Belfast on 21 September. Wilson, an articulate and intelligent politician from East Belfast, is also the party's Press Officer and one of the three DUP members of the OUP/DUP "think-tank" which was recently established with a view to coordinating Unionist strategy on the Anglo-Irish talks.

Wilson told me at the outset that he is still sore at the fact that previous contacts which the Department had with the DUP were publicised in the "Irish Times". He claims (though I denied it) that the leak in question came from the Department. A decision was taken by the party leadership at the time that there would be no further contacts with Dublin officials. He had agreed to the present contact because he finds these contacts valuable and because "there are people who do their own thing in every party". He insisted, however, that the contents of our discussion must remain absolutely confidential.

Among the points which he made, in the course of a lengthy conversation, were the following:

- The speech made by Peter Robinson in Enniskillen on Friday evening*(the tone of which seemed to have taken Wilson a little by surprise) is, in essence, a device to sustain the credibility of Loyalist politicians during the present difficult period. Robinson's intention was to give expression to a number of fears which Unionists have about the Anglo-Irish talks and thereby to steal some of the thunder from Loyalist paramilitants. A "hard-hitting" speech like this is needed in order to keep the DUP in favour with an

*See attached cutting from today's "Irish Times"

increasingly restless and volatile Loyalist community. Wilson implied strongly, however, that the "act of war" warning sounded by Robinson (who is not usually given to fiery statements) was intended merely as headline-catching rhetoric. He also prefaced his entire remarks about the speech with the observation (intended presumably to qualify its significance) that "there are different strands of opinion within every party".

- I asked him nonetheless what the "consequences" might be to which Robinson had referred. He replied by making the following points. Firstly, a 1974-type strike could probably not be sustained this time round as Loyalists recognise that they are not in a position to take on the Army or the RUC. By comparison with the situation which obtained in 1974, the security forces are now much better equipped and have a much better intelligence network. (The problems foreseen by Wilson, significantly, were of a practical rather than ethical nature). In the event that Loyalist paramilitants become active, they will probably turn their attention to Catholics living in exposed areas such as the Short Strand or East Belfast and carry out a series of sectarian assassinations. A further target, Wilson continued, could be "you people", a phrase which he did not clarify but by which he seems to have meant (judging from subsequent remarks) a renewal of Loyalist bomb-attacks in border areas (on the lines of the Dublin/Monaghan bombings of May 1974). It may be noted in this connection that Wilson, by his own admission, has regular contact with the UDA in the course of his Council work in East Belfast.

- Wilson claims that the DUP has not been briefed on the present talks. While "everybody else" appears to be getting regular briefing, the DUP has been left out in

the cold, though the party's frequent contacts with NIO Ministers and civil servants would provide ample opportunity for briefing. Molyneaux, as a Privy Councillor, could be expected to be in the know but, if he is, "he's not sharing it with us". This sense of exclusion, combined with a general frustration occasioned over the years by the dismissive manner in which British Ministers have treated the DUP, probably caused Robinson to "sharpen" the tone of his Enniskillen speech.

- Referring to the document recently presented by Paisley and Molyneaux to Mrs. Thatcher (of which he was a co-author), Wilson told me that a written response from the Prime Minister was received some days ago. While he has not yet seen it, he understands that "she slammed the door in our faces". Paisley is planning to hold a joint press conference with Molyneaux on his return from North America at which he will reveal the contents of the OUP/DUP document as well as the Thatcher response and announce further action. The "think-tank" of which Wilson is a member is to meet this week in order to consider the Thatcher response and to plan strategy for the announcement of an Anglo-Irish agreement. Wilson left me with the impression that the politicians, at any rate, intend to keep their powder dry until the actual announcement of an agreement. He also expects that the "triumphalist" presentation of an agreement by the Dublin Government on the day (which, he believes, domestic political considerations will necessitate) will provide Unionists with ammunition additional to that contained in the actual agreement.

- If current media speculation is anything to go by, Wilson assumes that the British Government will try to sell an agreement to the Unionists with the arguments that (a) it would enhance the prospects of defeating the IRA; and (b) it would help to bring about the elimination of Sinn Fein from the political process. These arguments, in Wilson's view, will not be sufficient to compensate for what Loyalists will see as an infringement of Northern Ireland's sovereignty, the putting in place of machinery which will "trundle Northern Ireland down the road to a united Ireland". British Government assurances that this is not so will simply not be believed - "we have as much experience of British Government duplicity as you have".

- The decision by King to visit Dublin before he held talks with Unionist leaders ("it was bad enough that he phoned Peter Barry on his first day in office") is merely the latest example of British Government insensitivity. Wilson hinted, however, that Robinson's "personal" decision to boycott the meeting with King planned for this week is not universally supported in the party and that some would favour Molyneaux's more pragmatic approach.

- Wilson returned repeatedly to the theme of British Government indifference towards the DUP. Over the years it has presented quite a number of what Wilson considered to be reasonable proposals for solutions, "both internal and external" (sic), to the Northern Ireland problem but has been rebuffed on every occasion. The party has in consequence suffered a loss of face with its voters who now look instead to Loyalist paramilitants. While the British Government regularly argues that consitutional nationalism (i.e. the SDLP) must be supported by Unionists if a drift to the IRA is to be prevented, it noticeably fails to make

the same plea on behalf of constitutional Unionism (i.e., the OUP and DUP). When Wilson has pointed this out, the NIO line has been that, in contrast to the SDLP, the Unionist parties are strong enough to be able to absorb any grievances which may arise. Wilson warned, however, that this is a false assumption and that "the day will shortly come" when the remaining credit enjoyed in the Unionist community by politicians will run out and the paramilitants will take over. Already they have got in on the act by establishing the "United Ulster Loyalist Front" in the wake of Portadown. John McMichael of the UDA, a man with an astute political mind and ambitions to acquire a position of greater influence in Northern Ireland, saw the opportunity to capitalise on fears generated by Portadown about a British Government sell-out. In a very short time the UULF has succeeded in putting Unionist politicians on the defensive; indeed, the fact that a number of relatively senior politicians felt obliged to attend its first meeting indicates an awareness on the latter's part that "the wind was blowing in the direction of the paramilitaries". The hard-line speeches made by Unionist politicians since then, including Robinson's, owe much to this development: they are under intense pressure from grass-roots voters to match the level of belligerence set by the UULF's statements. (It is worth noting, however, that other Unionist sources with whom we have had contact would not attach as much significance to the UULF factor).

- Wilson reflected on the volatility of political developments in Northern Ireland, noting that "a relatively trivial event" such as the Portadown re-routing can prove to be a catalyst for a much more significant development. Another matter which could have a similarly disproportionate effect would be a

proposal, say, to allow street-names to be displayed in Irish, a "trivial matter" for Wilson and many others but one which, in certain circumstances, could trigger off quite unexpected resistance. The same volatility makes it impossible to predict accurately the forms which Loyalist protest about an Anglo-Irish agreement may take. Wilson recalled that, in the first week of the UWC strike in 1974 (in which he had a peripheral involvement), "we seemed to be getting nowhere" but that an entirely chance event in the second week (which he did not specify) had suddenly raised the strike to an entirely new plane.

- Wilson also emphasised the extremely narrow room for manoeuvre available to Unionist politicians and suggested that those who complain about Unionist intransigence should bear this in mind. The proposals made recently to Mrs. Thatcher were, by Unionist standards, relatively ambitious (in their acceptance, for example, of the desirability of good neighbourly relations and cross-border cooperation). The document, as reported in the "Irish Times" account (which Wilson confirmed to be accurate), aroused hostility for this reason in some sections of the party. While this opposition was not as significant as Paisley himself had initially feared, they would nevertheless have preferred if news of the visit to Downing Street had not leaked in the first place (Wilson suspected that a Belfast Airport employee had informed the media). When I mentioned speculation that the text of the document itself had been leaked by the OUP, Wilson commented wryly that "they're accusing us of having leaked it!". He felt, on balance, that the publicising of the proposals had not done the DUP much harm but pointed to the internal "grumbling" nevertheless as evidence of the limited latitude available to the party leader. In this connection, he mentioned also that last year's DUP

document entitled "Ulster - the future assured" had come under fire internally as a sell-out to the SDLP and that even the decision to allow the SDLP a single chairmanship on the new Belfast City Council had been severely criticised in some quarters.

- Wilson said that the DUP's unmitigated opposition to the Sinn Fein members of Belfast City Council was in line with assurances given to its voters during the local election campaign. Their fear is that, if Sinn Fein becomes acceptable at Council level in Northern Ireland, it will not be long before it becomes acceptable to NIO Ministers as well. Wilson would personally favour boycotting the Councils until such time as the Sinn Fein members are removed but his party is not yet ready to go that far. The argument in favour of a boycott is that the Councils do not have many powers left anyway but the argument against is that they constitute "the last remaining fragment of democracy" and must therefore be retained at all costs. Wilson calculates that, with Unionists boycotting the Councils, the British Government would have to assign the latter's functions to Royal Commissions in many cases. In due course, they would conclude that the present Councils would have to be abolished. Recognising that the root cause of the problem is Sinn Fein, who are "poisoning the political atmosphere" in Northern Ireland, they would call new elections based on either the proscription of Sinn Fein or on the stipulation that all candidates would have to sign a pledge renouncing the pursuit of political purposes by violent means.

- Sinn Fein's presence on the Belfast Council has had a deleterious effect on relations with the SDLP members. Wilson has worked well in the past with people like Brian Feeney but there is now a tendency to equate the

SDLP with Sinn Fein, particularly as individuals like Feeney, under pressure from Sinn Fein, find it increasingly necessary to demonstrate their Republican credentials at Council meetings. The sense of alienation between the DUP and the SDLP is reflected in the decision taken to deprive the SDLP of all but one committee chairmanship and of all positions on area Boards (a decision which Wilson himself has contested internally). In the longer term, however, Wilson feels that Unionists have no alternative but to cooperate with the SDLP. People such as himself and Robinson ("young politicians who will hopefully be around for a long time to come") recognise that "we have to live with the SDLP and to work together with them".

- In conclusion, I presented him with copies of the Minister's "Between" speech. Wilson remarked that the speech had expressed admirable sentiments and had "made an impression here" but that it did not address the question of how the "Britishness" of Unionists would be accommodated in a united Ireland - the latter being clearly the context in which the Minister had made his remarks.

David Donoghue.
David Donoghue

23 September 1985