

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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**Title:** Memorandum [circulated by Dr Garret FitzGerald, TD, Minister for Foreign Affairs] of discussion with Secretary of State for Northern Ireland [Merlyn Rees, MP] on reaction of United Kingdom government to the United Ulster Unionist Council's Northern Ireland Convention Report

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Wednesday, 5th November 1975

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SECRET

The central point of this discussion will necessarily be the likely reaction of the U.K. Government to the UUUC Convention Report.

In discussions at official level with Frank Cooper, Permanent Undersecretary of the Northern Ireland Office, in Dublin on 30th October, the impression was received that this reaction might fall short of a rejection of the UUUC Report and might instead take the form of seeking clarification of specific points or asking the Convention to consider specific propositions put to them by the U.K. Government.

There may well be merits in a "soft" response to the UUUC Report. An aggressive or provocative British rejection would strengthen Paisley's hand and make the situation more difficult for Craig and those who support him. Moreover, action by the British which required an early reaction from the Convention, before time has been allowed for the political situation in Northern Ireland to evolve, hopefully in Craig's favour, could precipitate a definitive rejection of any compromise in the Convention.

On the other hand a British reaction which did not reject the central proposition of the UUUC Report, and maintain a firm position on the need for power-sharing in government, could weaken Craig's position by feeding the illusion fostered by Paisley that the British Government could be brought round to accept

the kind of proposals that are contained in the UUUC Report.

It is clear that the way in which the British Government responds to the Convention Report - not merely the wording used but also the tone of their response - will be extremely important.

This situation contains dangers from our point of view. Given the disillusionment of the Northern Ireland Office civil servants with Convention politics and their seeming despair of any constructive outcome from dealings with the existing politicians, there is a clear danger that a "soft" British response, represented to us as being designed not to provoke a counter-productive reaction amongst the Loyalists, would in fact turn out to be the beginning of a major shift in British policy, including the <sup>effective</sup> abandonment of efforts to find a solution along the lines of the Craig compromise.

In other words we are probably at a turning point at present and failure on our part to ensure that the British do genuinely get this whole issue back to the politicians in a form in which they can discuss it constructively, could prove fatal.

In these circumstances it is a matter for consideration whether we should not at this point assert ourselves, even to the point of warning that should the British reaction not include an effective rejection of the UUUC proposals, however courteously framed, we would not be in the position to continue our support for British policy.

The recent Fianna Fáil decision to change policy with regard to Northern Ireland would tend to strengthen our hand to some degree in this matter by giving additional credibility to a strong stand



on our part, which could be seen by the British Government as a necessary act of self-protection by us, and the effective ending of bipartisanship here must also have the effect of making them feel even more dependent on this Government, as distinct from the Opposition, than they may have felt hitherto.

On the other hand, the playing of this "card", should it fail, could leave the situation a good deal worse. A public announcement on our part that we could no longer support British policy would, effectively for example, make it impossible for the SDLP to continue negotiations in Northern Ireland. It would also put us under great pressure here as to what alternative action we proposed to take. And, finally, it would greatly weaken our ability to continue credibly to press the British Government to remain in Northern Ireland until a solution is found.

The complexity of the issues involved - the importance of the tone as well as the content of the British response, the dangers that could flow from an overt divergence between ourselves and the British Government at present, together with, on the other hand, the very great danger to us if the British Government does not, in fact, stand firm on this issue - together make it very important that the action we take at this time should be very carefully judged and measured.

In these circumstances it is proposed that the line to be taken in the meeting with Merlyn Rees should be first of all to tease out British intentions with regard to the UUUC Report, and secondly, to indicate the reasons why their reaction to it must necessarily be seen by the Irish Government as being of crucial importance,

and as necessarily determining our future attitude.

In the light of the general tenor of this discussion with Rees, the Government will wish to consider what further action, if any, it might take to press our views on the British Government - either by way of written communication from the Taoiseach to the British Prime Minister, by way of a further Ministerial meeting or meeting between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister, or by way of further official discussions.