

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2006/133/684
Creation Date(s):	26 March 1976
Extent and medium:	4 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.

MEETING WITH SDLP DELEGATION, 26th MARCH, 1976.

Report of meeting.

1. A Government delegation met a delegation from the SDLP, at 4 p. m. on 26 March, 1976, in the Council Chamber, Government Buildings, for a general discussion of Northern Ireland affairs, as part of the continuing series of contacts between the two sides. The members of the Government present were the Taoiseach, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Justice. The SDLP representatives were Messrs. John Hume and Austin Currie. Officials present were Messrs. D. Nally and W. Kirwan, Department of the Taoiseach and Mr. S. Donlon, Department of Foreign Affairs.
2. The Taoiseach opened the meeting by referring to the meeting he and the Minister for Foreign Affairs had had the previous week with the British Prime Minister and colleagues. In addition to the matters referred to in the communiqué, he had stressed the importance of keeping the politicians in business in Northern Ireland. He was not sure how far the British Ministers had appreciated this point. Rees said that he was in contact with the politicians. The Irish side had put it to them that the position of the politicians would be greatly weakened without a forum or press coverage - and without any income. Mr. Wilson had said that he frequently met Mr. Fitt in the House of Commons in London.
3. The Taoiseach said that he had put it strongly to Mr. Wilson and Mr. Rees, that having "talks" with persons representing or connected with illegal and paramilitary organisations was damaging to the political parties in the North and to the prospects for a settlement there. The British Ministers had drawn a distinction between talks and negotiations. They had said they would not negotiate with such persons but had said frankly that they would not cease talks which were useful to them.
4. The British Ministers had identified two possible forms of direct rule: (1) benevolent and (2) grindingly inefficient. They had said they were not opting for the latter. They had, however, made it clear that the economic situation in the North was likely to deteriorate further and there had been indications that the Harland and Wolff shipyard might be affected.
5. Mr. Hume said that the SDLP had been quite busy since the dissolution of the Convention, deciding their strategy. This had regard to the growing acceptability of direct rule. They had decided to let the dust settle for a while. The situation was not, in their view, as hopeless as it might seem.

There was a lot of fermentation on the Loyalist side. Direct rule was bound to create divisions among them. There was a strong stream of thought which favoured resistance to letting the British deny them devolved government and an ascendancy of power. The SDLP strategy was to exploit these differences in the hope that there would be an increasing clamour for a return to devolved government even on a partnership basis. The SDLP would suggest a raising of the profile of Dublin/London contacts and co-operation. They would see a Ministerial meeting in Belfast as having a marked impact.

6. The SDLP had decided to keep their group of former Convention members in being, as a group of elected representatives. They would shortly be putting full-page ads in the newspaper telling people of the services available from the party. Mr. Rees had told them that former Ministers would have direct access to him as before. They intended to engage in private talks with different Loyalists.
7. There was no doubt that there was now a much better appreciation in Northern Ireland of the attitude of the Irish Government to IRA violence and that there was no longer scope or tendency to point the finger at the South in relation to violence and security. The SDLP would now suggest that there should be a full-scale meeting with large delegations between the Irish Government and the SDLP, going into the whole situation in depth and attended by a lot of publicity. They would propose to bring a delegation of about six people. The Taoiseach asked whether this might not be counter-productive. Mr. Hume said that it would not and that the SDLP were now in the position that they could say openly that security had been discussed at such a meeting.
8. The Taoiseach said that at the meeting he had had with him a few days previously, Mr. William Craig had expressed the view that some attempt at a new initiative should be made within the six months from the dissolution of the Convention (during which it could be recalled under the Northern Ireland Act, 1974). He had said that this could only come from the SDLP but had recognised that it might only be a face-saving exercise. Craig had thought that the initiative might relate to policing. It might be wishful thinking on his part but he had said that there seemed to be some change in the Official Unionists. He had said that if there were an early election parties supporting partnership would sweep the boards.
9. Mr. Hume commented that Mr. Craig's judgement of internal Loyalist politics had been had in the past. John Taylor had had differences with Paisley but had shown no sign of being ready to agree to SDLP participation

in government. Mr. Currie said that the SDLP would have reservations about the launching of an initiative within the six-month period that had been mentioned. Whether they occurred deliberately or not, direct rule was going to create a lot of difficulties. He and Hume had had a lengthy dinner with Mr. Rees and Sir Frank Cooper on the eve of the announcement of Mr. Wilson's retirement. It had come through very strongly that the economic position would get worse over the following six months, especially in the area east of the Bann. This might foster an anti-British feeling but whether this would lead, among Loyalists, to more emphasis ^{on} to the need for devolved government even at the price of partnership or to more attention to independence was a matter of speculation. It had also emerged at the dinner that some of those on the Unionist side were becoming desperate to divorce themselves from Paisley.

- X
10. Mr. Currie said that his main worry related to a link with the debate on devolution for Scotland and Wales. Mr. Hume said that Mr. Fitt had it from Mr. Rees that the British saw direct rule as continuing for 3 to 5 years. Mr. Currie said that he had challenged Cooper that the British were proposing to leave Northern Ireland and compel the SDLP to get together with the Loyalists. Cooper had said the British envisaged two years' direct rule followed by a further year's additional direct rule. The Minister for Foreign Affairs referred to the dangers attaching to drift and to a lack of any initiative from the British.
 11. Mr. Currie said that the third point which came across at the dinner was the British belief that the IRA were beaten. In reply to questions about how the SDLP perceived the situation in this respect, Mr. Hume said that in the Derry area this assessment could be confirmed. The Taoiseach recalled that Mr. Craig had suggested that it might be merely a question of different tactics - that sporadic attacks were not so demanding of IRA resources but maintained the climate of fear and uncertainty. The Minister for Foreign Affairs doubted that the IRA had the ability to do enough damage in Northern Ireland to provoke large-scale retaliation there or to do enough damage in Britain to provoke a strong public reaction there. Mr. Currie said that the paramilitary groups were increasingly preoccupied with internal fighting.
 12. The Minister for Justice asked how the Irish Government could help. Mr. Hume said that we should seek to have further talks with people on the unionist side. The Official Unionists and even Mr. Ernest Baird might be interested in such talks. The Minister asked what possibility there would be of convening a roundtable conference, without any commitment, of the Irish

Government and the parties representing both sides in the North. Mr. Hume said that he would tentatively favour the idea. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said there might be some hope of realising the idea when the dust settles.

13. Mr. Hume thought there should be an initiative within a year. Beyond that, the political process might become atrophied. The Minister for Foreign Affairs thought that if there was to be a move forward, some start should be made before the end of the period of 6 months after dissolution of the Convention. All parties had cards to play. The question was who was to start the process. Mr. Currie considered that all the Irish Government had to do was to continue acting as it had been doing. The SDLP should hold themselves ready and continue their private contacts. They should think in terms of next October or November for any initiative. The Minister for Foreign Affairs commented that this assessment was probably correct but that the possibility of an earlier move should not be excluded and an eye should be kept open for any suitable opportunity.
14. Mr. Hume said that they had received the impression that adverse developments affecting the shipyard might emerge within the next month. It was an open question as to whether this would help to produce political movement. Mr. Nally recalled that at the talks in London, Mr. Wilson had quoted a figure of £70 per man per week as the British subsidy to the yard. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that disemployment at the yard could possibly lead to greater violence in East Belfast. Mr. Hume said that the slackening of IRA activity, whatever its motivation, was helping to soften opinions in the North.
15. Mr. Currie expressed the view that cross-border co-operation in practical spheres could be pushed forward now that the reasons previously advanced against this were no longer valid. The Taoiseach said that he and the Minister for Foreign Affairs had pushed this way very hard at the recent discussions with the British Prime Minister and Ministers. The Minister noted the danger that, if pushed on unwilling partners, promotion of cooperation could prejudice the evolution of loyalist political opinion. Reference was made to studies being undertaken of the scope for directing Irish Government purchasing orders to Northern firms e.g. in respect of ships or telephone cables.
16. The meeting then concluded.