

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## IRELAND



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FOR ATTENTION: MICHAEL COLLINS, NEW YORK CONSULATE.

FROM TED SMYTH, G.I.S.

'PRIOR'S NORTHERN IRELAND PLAN - A FLAWED MASTERPIECE' BY PAUL ARTHUR.

'I LONG FOR THE TIME WHEN I CAN GO TO THE UNITED STATES AND SAY, LOOK AT WHAT WE HAVE ACCOMPLISHED. WE'VE GOT POLITICAL STABILITY AND PUT SOME MONEY IN.' THIS IS WHAT JAMES PRIOR, BRITAIN'S NORTHERN IRELAND SECRETARY, TOLD A LONDON NEWSPAPER LAST FEBRUARY. HIS WISH WILL BE REALISED WHEN HE VISITS NEW YORK THIS WEEK.

MR PRIOR IS BRITAIN'S SIXTH NORTHERN IRELAND SECRETARY OF STATE IN A DECADE. HE WAS A CONTROVERSIAL CHOICE LAST SEPTEMBER BECAUSE OF HIS PUBLIC OPPOSITION TO MRS THATCHER'S MONETARIST POLICIES. IN 1975 HE HAD STOOD AGAINST HER FOR THE LEADERSHIP OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY BUT POLLED BADLY. PRIOR'S ULSTER POSTING, THEREFORE, REMOVED AN UNRULY BARON FROM THE CENTRE OF POWER. BUT SOME OBSERVERS FEEL THAT HE HOPES THAT EVEN MODERATE SUCCESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND WOULD PROVIDE HIM WITH A SPRINGBOARD TO LAUNCH FURTHER ASSAULTS ON MRS THATCHER'S LEADERSHIP.

PRIOR BROUGHT WITH HIM TO NORTHERN IRELAND THE STRONGEST MINISTERIAL TEAM THE PROVINCE HAS SEEN SINCE BRITAIN ASSUMED DIRECT RULE IN 1972. HIS AIDES ARE POLITICAL HEAVYWEIGHTS, ACKNOWLEDGED FOR THEIR OPENMINDEDNESS AND PROFESSIONALISM. SHOCKED BY THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONDITIONS THAT CONFRONTED THEM, THEY DEVISED A STRATEGY OF CONSTITUTIONAL INGENUITY ALLIED TO GREATER SECURITY AND ECONOMIC IMPROVEMENT.

SO WHAT HAS MR PRIOR ACHIEVED IN THE PAST 10 MONTHS? HE INHERITED A VERY TENSE SECURITY PROBLEM BECAUSE OF THE IRA HUNGER STRIKE BUT HE MANAGED TO END IT SUCCESSFULLY. THERE FOLLOWED IN NOVEMBER 1981 THE ASSASSINATION OF REV ROBERT BRADFORD, AN ULSTER PROTESTANT MEMBER OF THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT, BY THE OUTLAWED PROVISIONAL IRISH REPUBLICAN ARMY. IN RETALIATION REV IAN PAISLEY FORMED A 'THIRD FORCE', AN UNOFFICIAL MILITIA OF HARDLINE PROTESTANTS. ONCE AGAIN CIVIL WAR BECAME A REAL POSSIBILITY IN ULSTER. BUT PRIOR PROVED UNFLAPPABLE AND DECISIVE IN DEFUSING A VERY DANGEROUS SITUATION. SINCE THE BEGINNING OF 1982 THERE HAS BEEN A RELATIVE CONTAINMENT OF POLITICAL VIOLENCE.

ON THE ECONOMIC FRONT PRIOR HAS WORKED MIGHTILY BUT WITH VERY LIMITED SUCCESS. LAST JANUARY HE EXTRACTED AN EXTRA £90M FROM A PARSIMONIOUS BRITISH EXCHEQUER FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR BUT IT HAS ONLY BEEN A DROP IN THE OCEAN. 'THE NORTHERN IRELAND ECONOMY IS NOT IN RECESSION', HE SAYS. 'IT IS ACTIVELY IN DECLINE'. WITH ABOUT 1 IN 4 OF THE PROVINCE'S ADULT MALES UNEMPLOYED (HIGHER PERCENTAGE OF CATHOLICS) HE HAS A MONUMENTAL TASK.



IT IS MR PRIOR'S ATTEMPT TO MARRY ECONOMIC PROSPERITY TO POLITICAL STABILITY WHICH BRINGS HIM TO NEW YORK. THIS POLICY HAS ALSO CAUSED BITTER CONTROVERSY IN ULSTER. EVERY SECRETARY OF STATE HAS FAILED TO DELIVER AN INTERNAL SETTLEMENT FOR NORTHERN IRELAND BECAUSE HE CANNOT PERSUADE THE POLITICAL LEADERS OF THE TWO THIRDS PROTESTANT MAJORITY TO SHARE POWER WITH THE ONE THIRD CATHOLIC MINORITY. PRIOR (AND HIS DEPUTY, LORD GOWRIE) SAY THAT THEY CAN SUCCEED WHERE OTHERS HAVE FAILED. THEY HAVE DEVISED WHAT APPEARS TO BE AN INGENIOUS DO-IT-YOURSELF DEVOLUTION KIT WHICH SUGGESTS TO ULSTER'S VOTERS THAT PROSPERITY WOULD FOLLOW IF THEIR POLITICAL LEADERS WOULD ONLY END THEIR DICKERING AND WORK FOR THE COMMON GOOD. THE FIRST STAGE OF THIS FORM OF 'ROLLING' DEVOLUTION WILL BE AN ELECTION FOR A 78 SEAT ASSEMBLY ON 20 OCTOBER NEXT. INITIALLY THE ASSEMBLY WILL SCRUTINISE THE WORK OF PRIOR'S TEAM BUT IF THERE IS ENOUGH CROSS COMMUNITY AGREEMENT BETWEEN NATIONALISTS AND UNIONISTS REAL POWERS WILL BE DEVOLVED.

THE PRIOR PLAN IS GRAVELY FLAWED. ULSTER POLITICIANS ARE CONCERNED WITH THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM OF NATIONAL ALLEGIANCE AND THEY WILL NOT SET THAT CONCERN ASIDE TO WORK TOGETHER ON ECONOMIC OR SOCIAL ISSUES. ONLY THE NON-SECTARIAN ALLIANCE PARTY (THE FOURTH LARGEST IN THE PROVINCE) HAS SHOWN ANY ENTHUSIASM FOR ROLLING DEVOLUTION. EVEN A SECTION OF PRIOR'S CONSERVATIVE PARTY MOUNTED A FILIBUSTER AGAINST THE BILL IN THE BRITISH PARLIAMENT LAST MONTH. THE LABOUR OPPOSITION OF MR FOOT IS PROFOUNDLY DISSATISFIED WITH THE DERISORY ATTENTION PRIOR HAS DEVOTED TO THE IRISH REPUBLIC'S ROLE IN BRINGING ABOUT POLITICAL STABILITY ON THE WHOLE ISLAND. THE DUBLIN GOVERNMENT ITSELF IS FURIOUS THAT THE WHOLE EXERCISE HAS DIVERTED ATTENTION FROM THE DEVELOPMENT OF CO-OPERATION BETWEEN THE TWO SOVEREIGN GOVERNMENTS. DUBLIN HAS DONE MUCH TO STAUNCH PROVISIONAL IRA TERRORISM BUT THE IRA'S POLITICAL WING, SINN FEIN, WILL NOW BE ABLE TO CONTEST THE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS ON THE PLATFORM THAT MODERATE NATIONALISM HAS FAILED TO SECURE ANY REAL POWERS FOR NATIONALISTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND.

THE FACT THAT PRIOR'S PLAN HAS SURVIVED OWES MUCH TO THE AUTHOR'S TENACITY AND POLITICAL AMBITION. HIS POLITICAL PROSPECTS DEPEND ON REDUCING BRITAIN'S DIRECT RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE ULSTER CRISIS IN THE EYES OF WORLD OPINION. THIS HAS NOT BEEN A SINGLE-HANDED POLITICAL EXERCISE. PRIOR HAS WORKED A MUTT AND JEFF ROUTINE WITH LORD GOWRIE. PRIOR, THE GENTLEMAN FARMER AND FORMER EMPLOYMENT MINISTER, A BLUFF BUT HARDHEADED FELLOW, PLAYS THE 'UNIONIST CARD' BY TELLING PARLIAMENT 'I BELIEVE THAT OUR PROPOSALS ARE THE MOST LIKELY TO TIE NORTHERN IRELAND INTO THE UNITED KINGDOM'. GOWRIE, BORN IN DUBLIN, A PUBLISHED POET AND UNIVERSITY LECTURER, THINKS ALOUD THAT THE BORDER DIVIDING IRELAND IS AN ECONOMIC NONSENSE, THAT THERE IS A NEED FOR DUAL CITIZENSHIP, AND HE ROUNDLY DECLARES 'IF IT REALLY COMES TO THE CRUNCH I CONSIDER MYSELF IRISH'.

IT IS NOT THAT THESE TWO POLITICIANS ARE UNAWARE OF THE REAL PROBLEMS. IN THAT LANGUID MANNER BELOVED OF THE ARISTOCRACY, LORD GOWRIE PLAYS A BACK-HANDED COMPLIMENT TO ULSTER'S POLITICIANS 'THEY ARE VERY ABLE MEN. THE PROBLEM IS NOT THE CHAPS. SINCE TERRORISM AND VIOLENCE CREATE THE TENSIONS THE POLITICIANS CAN ONLY REFLECT THIS ANXIETY'.

AND YET MR PRIOR AND LORD GOWRIE MUST BE AWARE THAT THE NEW ASSEMBLY, IF IT EVER MEETS, WILL BE AN OPPORTUNITY FOR A NAKED POWER PLAY BY EXTREMISTS FROM IAN PAISLEY'S DEMOCRATIC UNIONIST PARTY AND FROM THE IRA'S SINN FEIN. IN ADDITION, IRISH AMERICAN OPINION WILL BE INFLAMED AGAIN IF ROLLING DEVOLUTION ROLLS INTO A CHASM.

ENDS.....

19 JULY 1982.