

DEFEATING TERRORISM: INFLUENCING OPINION IN THE REPUBLIC

1. The Republic's media is curiously intertwined with those of the UK. British national papers and broadcasting media have a wide audience here, Irish national papers and broadcasting have in turn a wide audience in Northern Ireland.

Scope for intervention

2. Irish opinion formers are therefore well aware, without any effort on the part of HMG, of the full range of our domestic debates on all kinds of issue. The attention given to Northern Ireland issues in Irish papers is far greater than, for instance, in the London based nationals. Taking into account an understandable Nationalist viewpoint in the Irish coverage, it is fair to say that the quality of coverage of Northern Ireland in the Dublin papers is consistently higher than in most of the London press. The absurdities of some of the tabloid coverage in themselves often become minor (sometimes not so minor) news stories here.

2. The following emerges from this:

- News coverage of Northern Ireland and its day to day analysis in the Irish media lies primarily with Belfast and London correspondents. In practical terms they are probably dealt with by Northern Ireland Information Services on lines similar to domestic journalists. (Our strong view would be that the correspondents of the three Dublin morning papers and RTE should be given at least as high priority care as those of UK papers, because of their influence on both Irish and Northern Irish opinions).

- The Embassy ends up doing relatively little handling of hards news.

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- The Embassy's information effort in relation to Northern Ireland is aimed mainly at editors, columnists, and the Sunday papers' analysts. We also keep in touch with political correspondents and security correspondents. The formers' main involvement is naturally with Anglo-Irish relations, the latter mainly with events in the South, but also to some extent with North-South cooperation. Both sets of journalists often have difficult relationships with their Belfast-based colleagues.

4. In general we have excellent access to relevant journalists. Our capacity to change views depends very much on the story. Our interlocutors are almost always well informed and up to date. Making progress with the media usually involves detailed discussion and reasoning. We can do little simply by issuing press releases. British press releases, received cold, will often be objects of suspicion. Similarly, background briefs prepared for use overseas are of little use here.

5. The Brooke initiative has given a boost to HMG's credibility, and Mr Haughey's reputation for deviousness gives us some advantage if it comes to a situation of his word being against ours. Unfortunately things are rarely as simple as this. However, last November we had a satisfactory campaign of briefing selected editors when the picture of political development painted in the media by the Irish Government had become distorted to a seriously damaging degree. The picture was corrected gratifyingly but we cannot expect circumstances to be as helpful very often.

6. Irish politicians are relatively open to Embassy contacts. In general it is difficult to bring about much change in their opinions, but there are often openings for supplying them with helpful arguments to back up helpful attitudes which they have

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already, and which they may be willing to deploy; or in other cases to help them understand why something apparently unreasonable may be more reasonable than they think.

7. North/South Ministerial visits are generally helpful, above all within the official world in Dublin. To date they have usually achieved only low-key publicity, and natural opportunities for high profile speeches have not been frequent. The main exception in recent years was Mr King's appearance in RTE's "Late, Late Show" which, as the Irish Government feared, was a great success. Dr Mawhinney's speech to the Dublin Rotary Club was also well worthwhile. Such visits, which do not involve attendance at a pre-existing occasion and at which the public presentation of HMG's views are a main purpose of the visit, cause the Irish Government considerable unease. This, and the difficulty of ensuring that the timing of events with a long lead time does not in the end prove awkward to us, means that these potentially very effective occasions cannot be used very often.

Future options

8. The Ambassador suggested some time ago that he might undertake more substantial speeches and interviews to try to put over HMG's views. This was agreed in principle, but in fact the delicate process of political development has made the problems of timing these events difficult. He has, however, made a number of speeches in the past year in which he has put over the British viewpoint on Northern Ireland to his audience. There is always the risk that the overspill between the media in these islands means that, unless very careful, there would be a danger that the Ambassador's words could become embroiled in domestic politics, particularly in Northern Ireland, which as an official rather than a Minister, would be a

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situation better avoided. There might be more scope for placing articles and interviews by NIO Ministers in Dublin papers and on RTE. There would be already market.

9. There is already enormous contact between academic, cultural, business/professional and all other manner of groups. Some are helped by the British Council, Anglo-Irish Encounter or the Commercial Section of the Embassy. Most are not, and many we find out about, if at all, only after the event. The British-Inter Parliamentary Body has got off to a good start in what may be its most important role: getting MPs and TDs better acquainted.

10. There may be scope for progress in the various youth and educational exchanges now being proposed by voluntary groups such as Glencree and British/Irish Exchange. These are very long term developments, however. We are also looking at a more active use of the FCO sponsored visits programme, which could have an impact in the long term.

11. Our weakest area from the point of view of understanding of presentation of British policy is that of security/confidence issues. This is because events in Northern Ireland which have been more or less instantaneously relayed by the Irish media, have almost always been presented from the nationalist viewpoint, while the NIO has usually had to explain that the matter is sub judice. These responses, while perhaps necessary, does considerable damage to an understanding of British policies in these areas. This is clearly a wider problem than one affecting just the Republic, but it arouses here in an acute form.

(CH/SILMAIL/14710)

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