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Secret documents show top Protestant churchman believed Rev Ian Paisley was a 'fascist' provocateur

4 minutes



Ian Paisley in his Ulster Resistance beret, 1986

The remarks are recorded in a file belonging to the Department of the Taoiseach, which has just been made available to the public via the University of Ulster's CAIN project (Conflict Archive on the Internet).

Dated July 17, 1986, it is the record of a conversation between Irish official David Donoghue and Rev Dr Tom Simpson.

Rev Simpson was at the time the general secretary of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and clerk of its assembly. He had also been its moderator in 1983/84.

The discussion centred on disorder at Twelfth parades, particularly in Portadown.

The document reads: “Simpson criticised the Orange Order (of which he is not a member) for failing to weed out a hooligan element which had been ‘moving up the ranks’ for some time now and which, if unchecked, could eventually ‘take over the Order’.

“The strict standards which had been imposed in the past in regard to membership of the Order were on the wane.

“Furthermore, no serious efforts were being made to prevent undesirable outsiders from joining individual Orange marches.

“The present Orange Order leadership seemed to have great difficulty in asserting its authority.

“In permitting the Order to march down Garvagh Road, the Chief Constable had no doubt been conscious of the need to shore up the leadership’s credibility in the face of this growing threat.”

It was suggested Rev Paisley would claim some credit for the police’s decision to permit the march, sparking a strong reaction from Rev Simpson.

“Dismissing Paisley as a ‘fascist’ who ‘liked to lead the Unionist people up the hill and – at the first sign of trouble – ‘just as quickly down again’, Simpson contended that pressure from the DUP leader played no part in [the chief constable’s] decision.”

The document noted that there had been trouble in the north Antrim village of Rasharkin – partly due to “hooligans from nearby Dunloy who had been made available by the DUP”, and members of the “equally disreputable Scottish Orange Order’ who were visiting the area”.

It concludes with Rev Simpson adding that local nationalists had been “asking for trouble” by tearing down the village’s Orange arch.

The document is just one of dozens made newly-available online at CAIN.

It may be one of the last major pieces of work CAIN does; despite protests from academics, journalists, and authors, the University of Ulster plans to cease funding CAIN later this year (although it is expected that much of its material will remain online).

A message from the Editor:

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Alistair Bushe