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Title:	Copy letter from Donal O'Sullivan, Ambassador of Ireland to Great Britain, to HJ McCann, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, reporting a meeting Harold Wilson, leader of the Labour Party, and Merlyn Rees, Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, regarding political developments in Northern Ireland
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Mr. O'Sullivan
Mr. MacGillivray

Personal and Confidential

November 8th, 1972

Dear Secretary

I had Harold Wilson and Merlyn Rees to lunch today and we had a fairly full discussion on the North. My overall impression from our conversation is that Harold Wilson is, to a considerable extent, out of touch with the position. He confessed, for example, that this was the first opportunity he had of hearing something from Merlyn Rees about his recent talks in Dublin. It seemed clear to me from his general remarks that Mr. Wilson's main concern at the moment is to add to the Government's embarrassment about the economic situation. He was highly critical of nearly every aspect of Government policy, including its handling of the North, and gave the impression of optimism about his Party's chances in the next General Election.

The most depressing feature of our conversation was the view put forward by Harold Wilson that he and many of his colleagues are becoming increasingly convinced that there is, on present indications, no early solution to the Northern problem. Willy Whitelaw or his successor could well be grappling with the question of even an interim solution for many years. Mr. Wilson told me that the point is increasingly being made to enthusiasts for Ireland on the Labour side that they are wasting their time. They could more usefully be applying themselves to Britain's internal

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problems. Side by side with this, there is, undoubtedly, a growing feeling among the public in favour of pulling the Army out of the North, after a specified period.

Both of them strongly contended that it is quite evident that the tune in relation to the North is being increasingly called by the majority side. The postponement of the local elections is the clearest proof of this. When I queried whether ^{this} ~~there~~, in fact, was anything new in the handling of Irish affairs by successive British Governments, they did not dissent. Here I called their attention to what Craig had said yesterday about the plebiscite and about how the United Loyalist Council would react to elections based on P.R. I then questioned whether, if the future is as gloomy as they seemed to think, a serious confrontation between the Army and the majority extremists is not what is required. Mr. Wilson thought things may have to come to that, particularly as the IRA now appears to be a diminishing problem.

During our talk, I covered fully the various points in the briefing note you sent me. They accepted the validity of all of them.

We discussed the proposed White Paper and the timing of it. They think it will be possible to persuade Mr. Whitelaw to produce the White Paper in advance of the plebiscite. They both expressed the view that it would be ridiculous to have a plebiscite other than in the context of an overall package which, inter alia, would make quite clear the Government's intentions in relation to an ^{All-} Ireland Council.

They both fully shared our view that the questions proposed

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for the plebiscite could hardly be more unfortunately phrased. The Labour Party will strongly press for a reframing of the questions. I put forward, as a personal suggestion, the alternatives mentioned in your briefing paper. Merlyn Rees made a note of them and said he thought them a considerable improvement. He did, however, tell me on the side that he is personally doubtful whether they will get away with changes in the questions.

In the view of my guests, an early plebiscite could be disastrous. The Labour Party will, therefore, strongly press for a specific understanding about the timing of the plebiscite when they reach the Committee stage of the Bill if not, indeed, during the second reading. What they will look for is agreement that the timing be subject to an affirmative decision of the House, probably of both Houses. They are, at present, studying the procedure for this.

The debate on the Green Paper will be on Monday. It will be opened on the Labour side by Merlyn Rees and closed by Shirley Williams. Merlyn Rees will also open for Labour on Tuesday on the Border Bill and Stan Orme will conclude. I am arranging for Stan Orme to come and see me in the meantime.

At the conclusion of our talk, I told Harold Wilson that I would very much like another chat with him before long and we arranged that I would make contact for a luncheon meeting at the Embassy with Mr. Rees and himself.

Yours sincerely

DONAL O'SULLIVAN

Hugh J. McCann Esq
Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs