

**NATIONAL ARCHIVES****IRELAND**

**Reference Code:** 2004/21/670

**Title:** Copy report, by the Department of Foreign Affairs, of a meeting between Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave and Tánaiste Brendan Corish on 29 August 1973 with a delegation from the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), mainly discussing the position of the SDLP in Northern Ireland and the general political and security situation.

**Creation Date(s):** 3 September, 1973

**Level of description:** Item

**Extent and medium:** 8 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.

SECRET

The Taoiseach, Mr. Liam Cosgrave, T.D., and the Tánaiste, Mr. Brendan Corish, T.D., met a delegation from the SDLP in Government Buildings at 3.30 p.m. on 29 August, 1973. The SDLP representatives were Messrs. Gerry Fitt, John Hume and Paddy Devlin. Also present were Mr. H.J. McCann, Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Dermot Nally, Assistant Secretary, Department of the Taoiseach and Mr. Seán Donlon, Counsellor, Department of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. Fitt began by referring to a letter which he had recently received from the Taoiseach in which it had been suggested that the relationship between the SDLP and the Government should be "regularised in some formal way". The SDLP had considered the letter but felt that it was in everyone's interest that the party maintain contact with all three political parties in the South. For that reason they were not anxious to formalise the contact with the Government, irrespective of which party was in office. The Taoiseach explained that the purpose of his letter was not to suggest formalising contact on a party to party basis but rather he wanted to achieve a situation where the Government knew exactly who spoke for the SDLP. In recent months two delegations had been received but only one or two people had been on both delegations and it was noted that yet a differently composed delegation had been to see Mr. Whitelaw in the interval between the two Dublin meetings. The Government wanted to keep in the closest possible touch with the SDLP but they felt that the present arrangements often presented them with an impossible situation. Mr. Devlin explained that the party was trying to give its newly elected public representatives an opportunity to participate fully in what was happening and hence the variations in the composition of delegations. They wanted to get all 19 into a "front line

- 2 -

position". The Tánaiste said that while this was fully understood as also was the SDLP's desire to avoid formal association with any one party in the South, it was essential for the Government to know that they were receiving properly accredited delegations. It was agreed that for the future "one of the officers of the party" would telephone Mr. Nally of the Department of the Taoiseach to accredit any visiting delegation or to convey any urgent message.

Mr. Fitt then outlined his party's present position. For two or three years they had been kicked around by everyone, including the Provos. and the British and because of uncertainty about the extent of their support they were in a weak position to fight back. Now, however, the SDLP was the second largest party in NI and spoke as the authentic voice of a significant percentage of the population. Their main immediate aim was to take violence out of the situation but it must also be borne in mind that they had fought the Assembly elections not on the basis of the NI Constitution Act but on the basis of a specific programme including reform of the police, the ending of internment and the recognition of the Irish dimension. Two months had now elapsed since the elections and they had absolutely no progress to report to their supporters. There had not even been the minimal concession of releasing the compound 8 internees, all of whom could be released with impunity since they had either never been associated with the IRA or had now given a clear indication that they had severed any links they might have had with it. The SDLP's general position had been outlined in detail at one of the previous meetings with the Government. They wanted to see simultaneous progress in three distinct areas, viz. the setting up of an effective Council of Ireland, reform of the RUC and moves to end internment and the setting up of a NI Executive. The SDLP could not walk itself into the situation of

- 3 -

accepting power sharing in an Executive and then find that no progress was forthcoming on either the police or a Council of Ireland. They needed action on all three fronts before going into the Executive. In this the British seemed to be taking a different line. Mr. Heath was suggesting that they should go into the Assembly and then the other things they wanted could be considered. In recent discussions with British Ministers and senior civil servants, it had been suggested that the SDLP's position was not supported by the Government here and in particular at the meeting which they had had with him the previous day, Mr. Heath had said in a roundabout way that "the Government in the Republic would like to see you go into an Executive" before any tripartite talks. Mr. Heath had also indicated that he had discussed the setting up of a Council of Ireland with the Taoiseach and that they were in agreement that the Council of Ireland should be "substantial and open-ended". The SDLP regarded this as a valuable commitment on Mr. Heath's part.

Mr. Hume confirmed the impression that the British were trying to highlight imaginary differences between the positions held respectively by the SDLP and the Dublin Government and as an instance of this he described an incident during a meeting which an SDLP delegation had with Frank Cooper, Permanent Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office on 23 August. Following a lengthy discussion on the need for RUC reform, Cooper had said "But does Dublin support your view? We couldn't afford to ignore Dublin, but our information is that they are still thinking things over". Mr. Heath had also "strongly implied" during yesterday's meeting that the view of the Dublin Government was that there could be no move on police and civil service reform before a NI Executive was formed. Mr. Hume said that if they went into the Executive and

- 4 -

then had to leave it as protest against any lack of action on the three issues that concerned them, they would be accused of being "wreckers". If they went in before action on these issues, people would say "They are in it for the money". Mr. Devlin said that the object of Mr. Heath's visit was not to attend a memorial service but to lecture Northern Ireland politicians on what they should do. Whitelaw had convinced Heath that the SDLP were now in his pocket and could be delivered at the appropriate time. But the SDLP had availed of the visit to make their position on all issues "brutally clear" and Mr. Heath could not now be in any doubt as to where they stood. They had also impressed on him the need to reduce harassment of minority areas and to tackle the assassination problem in particular and Protestant violence in general in a more effective way than was at present being done. Mr. Fitt reiterated these points and said that not only had no concessions been forthcoming since the elections but there had been a dramatic increase in harassment of minority areas. After the Heath/SDLP meeting yesterday, Whitelaw had privately thanked Hume and himself for the strong views which they had conveyed to Heath on Army harassment and had implied that this would help him in the "troubles he was having with the Army". In reply to a question from the Tánaiste, Mr. Devlin said that there had not been 100 releases of short term prisoners earlier this month. The whole exercise had been a cover under which to release Farrell and Canavan and he doubted if more than a "handful" of prisoners had benefitted.

All the members of the delegation pointed out that in the situation as outlined above, it was vital that the SDLP and the Government should keep in close contact to ensure that there would be "nothing exploitable between us". The party hoped to have detailed documents shortly on both the reform of the police and the Council of Ireland and they would very much like to "clear the lines with

- 5 -

Dublin" before finalising these documents.

The Taoiseach told the delegation that the only agreement we had arrived at with the British in recent months was to postpone a hearing of the Strasbourg Case from July to October and that had been done only to facilitate political developments in Northern Ireland, including the setting up of the Assembly. For this, they had been accused of "being soft" and had really got nothing in return - so far. No comprehensive suggestions had been made to the British on the reform of the RUC or on the details of a Council of Ireland and our position on the timing of events was that there should be immediate and simultaneous progress on police and civil service reform, the setting of of a Council of Ireland and the setting up of Northern Ireland institutions. This position had been conveyed to the British authorities. Within the last ten days, a note had been sent to London in which a strong position had been taken not only on the Strasbourg Case but also on a Council of Ireland. In fact, the various points covered by the SDLP had all been the subject of recent representations to the British authorities at different levels. In particular, the reaction to the case they made about persons in Cage 8 had been negative. (Mr. Fitt said that this was the army's doing). The Government had given nothing away and had made it perfectly clear that it shared fully the SDLP's general position on the need for simultaneous action at the three "Conference tables".

The delegation indicated that following yesterday's meeting with Mr. Heath, they envisaged that a conference of Northern Ireland political parties to discuss the future of the police would be held about the middle of September and their best guess in relation

to a tripartite conference was that it would take place in mid- or late-October. Heath had indicated that he wanted the tripartite talks to take place "as soon as possible; next week, if necessary" though this was; of course, conditional on the formation of the NI Executive which would constitute the third party at the conference table. In regard to the timing of the next meeting of the Assembly, the delegation said that the Standing Orders Committee was bogged down. An Assembly meeting before the end of October was unlikely though Mr. Hume was slightly more optimistic and thought it could take place late in September or early in October.

Mr. Fitt expressed satisfaction with the Government's position as outlined by the Taoiseach and it was agreed that, in view of the timetable envisaged, a further meeting should take place in about two weeks at which the SDLP's detailed documents on the police and the Council of Ireland would be discussed. The Taoiseach suggested that it would be helpful to have the documents in advance but Mr. Fitt indicated that they would prefer to bring them along and elaborate on them at the meeting. It was further agreed that either Fitt, Hume or Devlin would telephone Mr. Nally of the Taoiseach's Department to set up the arrangements for the meeting and for any future meetings which might become necessary.

In a general discussion of the present situation in Northern Ireland, the delegation said that Paisley might not maintain his circus performances at the Assembly. He was beginning to realise that if he did, the Unionists would be in a minority in the Assembly: and the SDLP and Faulkner would share the cake on a 50/50 basis and leave him out in the cold. Faulkner's continued leadership of the official Unionists was important since that would ensure the

- 7 -

continued fragmentation of Unionism. Bradford was unlikely to replace Faulkner but even if he did, the position would not alter radically. The only possible unifying force on the horizon was Harry West and his assumption of the leadership was unlikely. In the foreseeable future, there would therefore be two separate Unionist factions, one led by Faulkner or Bradford and the other led by Paisley. The SDLP's interest would be best served by maintaining Faulkner as leader but ensuring that he did not become Chief Executive. The Alliance Party was moving in some way towards the SDLP's position and recent talks with Cooper and Glass were encouraging.

The security situation was improving somewhat and the Provo. campaign was in very low gear. The number of monthly Provo. actions was down from 1000 in July 1972 to 40 in July this year, according to Paddy Devlin and the delegation as a whole was of the view that though the Provos. had plenty of material in Northern Ireland, the leaders, including Twomey, were on the run in the South and any training that was taking place was taking place in the South, mainly in Co. Donegal. As part of their desperate efforts to attract support, the Provos. were now using the confidential telephone to pass on false information which resulted in the British Army searching the house of a moderate or harassing a previously moderate area in the hope that this would drive people to support violence once more. The current bombing campaign in Britain was probably the work of a Provo. fringe group operating in association with the Angry Brigade and similar groups. There was still a very obvious discrimination in the deployment of security forces in Northern Ireland. Despite the increasing evidence of Protestant extremism, the Catholic areas were the only ones being heavily leaned on and there appeared to be very little

action to deal with the renewed wave of assassinations. Mr. Pitt also drew attention to a recent court case where a Protestant youth who was on an arms charge had been very leniently dealt with following a plea on his behalf by a local UDA officer whose character references had been apparently accepted by the judge.