

NATIONAL ARCHIVES**IRELAND**

Reference Code: 2005/7/663

Title: Redacted copy report written by John McColgan of the Department of Foreign Affairs on his visit to Belfast on 5 and 6 December during which he primarily met representatives of the Unionist community to gauge their views on the present situation in Northern Ireland. Includes a covering letter from John McColgan to Dermot Nally, Assistant Secretary in the Department of the Taoiseach.

Creation Date(s): 11 December, 1974

Level of description: Item

Extent and medium: 14 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.

Mr Nally

TSCH/3: Central registry records

Department of the Taoiseach



ROINN GNÓTHAÍ EACHTRACHA
DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS

BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH 2
DUBLIN 2

SECRET

// December 1974



Dear Dermot,

I enclose herewith a copy of the report of my most recent visit to Northern Ireland.

Yours sincerely,

John McColgan

John McColgan.

Taoiseach 16/12/74
Secretary 20/12
To the press

13/12
Mr Kennedy
To all of - & return
30/12
24/12

Mr. Dermot Nally,
Assistant Secretary,
Department of the Taoiseach,
Government Buildings,
Upper Merrion Street,
Dublin 2.

Visit to Belfast on 5th and 6th December 1974

I visited Belfast on 5th and 6th December and had meetings with the Rev. Brian Smeaton, the Rev. Martin Smyth, Grand Master of the Orange Order, Mrs. Anne Dickson, Independent Unionist in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Mr. Peter McLachlan of the UPNI, Mr. Billy Blease of the ICP, Fr. John O'Connor of DACRAS and Mr. Erskine Holmes of the NILP. I also met a mixed group of Protestant clergymen in the company of Deputy Harte who was in Belfast at the same time.

Brian Smeaton who has consistently been quite pessimistic about events in Northern Ireland in the many meetings I have had with him since last July was on this occasion in a much more optimistic mood. This mood was also reflected to a lesser extent in the conversations I had with a number of the other people I met. Smeaton assured me that he felt sure that the assassination campaign on the Protestant side had now been switched off. He was prepared to prophesy that in fact this was not just a temporary cease fire but that there would be no more assassinations between now and the Convention elections. The shooting of the shopkeeper on the Shankill Road the previous Wednesday had been done by some young vandals who were trying to rob him at the time and it was not in any way connected with the assassination campaign. According to Smeaton, there has been a big clean-up inside the UDA and a re-organisation of the command structure.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] the Protestants are now on top and there is no need for them to be beholden to anybody. Smeaton recently had a long conversation with Paddy Devlin and Devlin was very keen to have a long meeting with



Smeaton also feels that there is now some hope for the Convention and that the Protestants will accept some form of power-sharing. He also explained in guarded terms that he was personally involved in trying to establish the nucleus of a local police force for the Ardoyne area which might eventually develop into a permanent police force if and when agreement is reached on policing. He is also now very active on the housing front and in his terms the housing crisis in Northern Ireland is probably now more serious than the political one.

I had lunch on Thursday with the Rev. Martin Smyth, Grand Master of the Orange Order. Mr. Smyth, who the previous day had made a strong statement on the futility of the assassination campaign, spent a considerable time talking about this aspect of the problem. He seemed genuinely disturbed that so many "poor people are being shot who never belonged to any political or military organisation" and expressed the view that "our people are going too far in their righteous indignation". Some of the recent happenings in Ulster had been terrible and he would be the first to admit that there were a lot of very evil people amongst the Loyalist paramilitary groups.

When I asked him what his feelings about Dublin were at present and what we could do to help in the present situation he ran through the traditional range of Protestant demands: the need to change the Constitution and the school system; a low profile from politicians in the South; a demand for pressure on the SDLP to discourage them running to Dublin so often and to persuade them to be good Ulstermen. He was particularly critical of John Hume's attitude to the RUC and emphasised that the RUC of 1974 was a much changed force from that of 1969. It was now genuinely trying to operate a non-sectarian police policy.

On the Convention question he was fairly hard-line. His basic principle would be that it was not possible to share power with those people who

want to bring about the end of the Northern Ireland State. However, he held out some hope that the Convention may work and that if people want power there would have to be compromise on both sides. But he felt that whoever was the leader of the largest party in the next Northern Ireland Assembly should have the absolute right to choose his own team of Ministers and this is something that the Protestant population would not yield on. It might well be there would be a number of Catholics in that team but the absolute right to decide who would be in the team must be kept for the leader of the overall majority party. While the minority population were depressed at the moment it should also be known that there was great depression on the majority side. They had had five years of suffering and difficulty and had seen everything they had built being torn down around them. They had reached a point beyond which they were not prepared to go and the Ulster workers stoppage had shown where this point was. There would be no further UWC strike in the immediate future but if the British Government tried to impose a solution against the wishes of the majority population then another strike would be the ultimate weapon.

He expressed considerable appreciation for the Minister's speeches in the U.S. criticising NORAIID and the Minister's consistent position on the whole question of funds for the IRA. Canon Padraig Murphy had also done good work in this respect and Smyth has expressed his appreciation to him personally. Smyth knows the U.S. quite well and has been there several times and he seemed appreciative of the difficulty of explaining the present complex problem to the Irish-American population. He welcomed our new legislation in the South to set up extra-territorial courts. He expressed some considerable bitterness that people [REDACTED] was still a practising Minister of religion. He would not blame the Government so much as the Catholic hierarchy and wondered how they could justify

allowing [redacted] continue in the priesthood. He hoped that our new legislation would pick up people [redacted] but I said that as I understood the matter, the effect of the legislation would not be retrospective but would only apply to offences committed after the Bill became law. He also quized me very closely in connectio with the UDA visit to Libya [redacted] and what his influene was in the South. I explained clearly to him that he was a private individual and while I did not know him personally, the information available to us [redacted] The Rev. Smyth expressed deep concern that the Libyans might set up a bank in Monaghan and wondered if we had legislation to control this. I assured him that if a bank was set up for the purposes he seemed to be suggesting it could not be done without our consent, which would not be forthcoming.

He spoke at some length of establishing a relationship of good neighbourliness with Southern Ireland and saw the clear necessity for us to talk about our mutual problems. But the formal institution of an Irish dimension was something which frightened the Protestant people and something which we would have to see in Dublin they could never accept. They did not want to be Irish - they were by history and tradition British and this they must continue to be.

While Rev. Smyth is very charming personally, his views are quite hard-line and he would clearly not be prepared to compromise on things like the Irish dimension and the question of the Union and the right of Protestants to rule in Ulster. His strongest point was certainly the need to improve the security situation and the need for Dublin to help in this, not just by improving security down South but by using whatever good influence they had on the SDLP to get them to move on policing. He said the SDLP had done a good job of work in the Executive but they had failed totally to do enough to help the RUC

and if they had been seen to be doing this they might well have had considerably more Protestant support for the continuation of the Executive. The SDLP were now developing a very hard-line image and it would be difficult for the Protestant politicians to share power with them for this reason. People like Sean Hollywood and Vincent McCluskey were less intransigent but it was unlikely that they would be nominated for Ministerial positions rather than the present leaders. He would not exclude the possibility, however, if the leaders of the Ulster coalition in the next Northern Ireland Assembly wished to share power that they might well invite people like McCluskey and Hollywood to be the representatives of the minority rather than Fitt, Devlin or Hume.

Mr. Smyth expressed appreciation for the chance to talk to me and said that he hoped we might have further such meetings at intervals.

I spent the whole of Thursday evening with Deputy Harte meeting a mixed group of about ten Northern Ireland clergymen from the Church of Ireland, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches. We met in the house of Mr. Bruce Cooper ^{in Greenisland} who is head of the Department of Further Education in the Northern Ireland Polytechnic and who lives in Greenisland, a heavily Protestant and very hard-line area. Mr. Cooper who is an English Catholic, married to a Swede, is by race and social status insulated from the pressures that come on Catholics in his area but he said that a substantial number of the 200-300 Catholics who live in this largely Protestant enclave, are extremely frightened by the possibility of mass Protestant violence. Deputy Harte and I subsequently had dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Cooper and Mrs. Anne Dickson, Independent Unionist for South Antrim, and her husband.

Mrs. Dickson, who got in on the first count as an Independent Unionist in the last Assembly election, is confident of holding her seat in the Convention election though she will not get in on the first count this

time because of the hardening of political attitudes among Protestant voters. The previous evening her constituency association had decided to affiliate to the Faulkner Unionists. She will, therefore, be standing as a Faulkner Unionist candidate in the Convention elections. She is reputed to be a very hard constituency worker and enjoys a substantial personal vote because of her work for internees. She expressed the view that the West Unionists would not do well in the Convention elections and the the UUUC candidates, which will be successful, will be mainly DUP and Vanguard people. She admitted that her assessment of the Convention being successful had begun to change recently and she definitely detects a mood that people want a political solution. She was critical of the SDLP on their policing policy and felt that this would be a key factor in getting the hard-line Unionists to agree to power-sharing. The SDLP would have to play down the Irish dimension aspects of any settlement. She has a supreme contempt for the hard-line Loyalists and spoke very bitterly about James Craig, the DUP Assemblymen from her own constituency who died recently.

The group of Protestant clergymen with whom we spoke for three or four hours were very appreciative of the fact that Deputy Harte had come to see them and expressed a strong desire for the continuation of this type of contact. They suggested using Corrymeela as a possible forum for an exchange of views between the Protestant churches and politicians from the South. While all being very sincere men, they expressed a feeling of helplessness in the present situation and indicated that the level of church going and religious practice amongst the Protestant population is rapidly declining and that their influence was at best marginal on the developing political situation. With regard to the South, they expressed the commonly held Protestant view that changes in the Constitution were essential and would help to win a certain amount of moderate Protestant opinion. They also expressed a sense of sadness and disappointment that while many Northerners were prepared to travel South and knew the South reasonably well, the number of Southerners who come North and know anything about the North of Ireland is pathetically small. They urged Deputy Harte to get his fellow politicians in the South

TSCH/3: Central registry records Department of the Taoiseach
to do everything possible to persuade the hierarchy to take a more reasonable attitude on the question of mixed marriages. Deputy Harte pointed out to them that this question was basically one for Rome rather than Dublin and also that the capacity for Irish politicians to influence the hierarchy in anything was considerably less than many Unionists imagined.

Deputy Harte also used the opportunity to sound out their opinion of Desmond Boal, without revealing why he was interested in getting their assessment of him. They generally thought that Boal was looked on by the average Protestant as being somewhat outside politics at present, as having cut his link with Paisley and as in the long-run being too clever by half and therefore not to be trusted. I should add that in the course of my own conversation with Deputy Harte, he told me that he has discussed the proposal that Boal should be the mediator between the two hard-line factions with John Hume and Oliver Napier and that both are enthusiastic about it. Deputy Harte has as yet got no firm commitment from the British that they will even talk to Boal. He discussed the matter with Mr. Hickman in the British Embassy on Wednesday evening but he has been unable to see Merlyn Rees himself. When I left him on the Friday at noon to go to some other meetings I had arranged, he was still trying to push the Boal proposal through Mr. James Allen of the FCO. According to Deputy Harte, Boal is very enthusiastic about the prospect and Harte is putting it very strongly to his contacts in the Northern Ireland Office that it is irresponsible of them not to at least talk to Boal and listen to what he has to say at this stage. Boal was apparently offered the Chairmanship of the Convention by Merlyn Rees some time ago but turned it down because he believes the Convention as presently constituted has no hope of working. He feels that negotiations have to take place at two levels, i.e. the paramilitary one and the political one and he is more than ready to make what contribution he can to help the paramilitary people reach an agreement.

Deputy Harte and I on the Friday morning also met Mr. Peter McLachlan of the UPNI. McLachlan, in contrast to the last time I spoke to him, was in a much more optimistic mood. He says that things are now beginning to move back towards the Faulkner Unionists and while not willing to predict any startling developments he feels that their showing in the Convention elections will be considerably better than he would have thought even remotely possible a few weeks ago. Faulkner himself has found a new lease of life and has recovered from the gloom of the collapse of the Executive. He described him as being in a fighting mood again and he is confident that he will get back to the centre of the stage before too long. He had not heard that Anne Dickson's constituency association had decided to affiliate to the UPNI but knew that it had been in the wind. He was clearly delighted by this and said that this type of development was an example of what was happening elsewhere in the province and that the UPNI were beginning to pick up support again. He also felt that the Libya visit by the UDA people would create its own type of disruptive yeast within the UUUC. He saw this as a good thing as the only yeast currently in operation on that front was that of the Rev. Paisley. I should mention in passing that I also heard that Jim Kilfedder may be prepared to break the party agreement that Westminster MPs should not stand for the election to the Convention unless they are party leaders. In addition there is a rumour current that Enoch Powell may now want to stand for the Convention and may try to get the UUUC to rally behind the total integration platform.

Deputy Harte discussed his Boal proposal with Mr. McLachlan and McLachlan was very enthusiastic about it. McLachlan's assessment of Boal is as a decent man and that any deal Boal could bring about between the ^{that he has a considerable store of goodwill amongst Protestants} Gunmen would be likely to be accepted by the Protestant Community. Harte expressed his frustration that he had been unable to meet directly with Rees to sell it to him and McLachlan suggested that if he (McLachlan) and Napier were to go to Rees

and to push the idea, it might help. I had to leave them at this point in time to go to another meeting so I am unable to say whether in fact they went ahead with that idea or not.

The other main point which McLachlan made was that Dublin would have to try and persuade the SDLP to move on the policing issue. He was very critical of John Hume and said that he was failing to give leadership on a critical issue which could help to resolve the stagnation that is currently besetting Ulster politics and open up the vacuum. Everyone in Northern Ireland knows that the RUC is a totally different force to the force which attacked Sam Devaney in his home in the Bogside in 1969. The fact of the matter is that less than 1,000 of the present force were in the RUC in 1969. It is a greatly reformed body and is genuinely trying to do a decent policing job without fear or favour to either community. The SDLP are putting the Faulkner Unionists in an impossible position and the UPNI may well have to go on the hook of no agreement in power-sharing in the Convention until agreement is reached on policing. He feels very strongly about this subject and indicated that he would like to talk it out with Hume. If it would help Hume and the SDLP to get off the hook that they are on presently the Faulkner Unionist would be prepared to adopt this intransigent attitude at the Convention. He sees it as a possible way of solving the impasse and enabling the SDLP to get out of what he considers the blind alley they are in at the moment. But he would clearly hope that the matter might be resolved in some way before the Convention and that Dublin has a role to play in this.

On the question of the UUUC, he expressed the view that the tensions within the party are coming much more to the surface in recent weeks and that the monolith may not be as solid as it presently appears to be. He is particularly inclined to think that the frictions within Vanguard which he described as an amalgam of Right Wing Monday Club people and the Fabian Society may well

lead to its disintegration. He considers that his own personal decision to contest the East Belfast seat in the Westminster election had been the price of the survival of the UPNI and that in retrospect this would be seen as the turning point in the party's fortunes.

I also met Fr. John O'Connor of the Down & Connor Relief Advisory Service. He expressed considerable satisfaction with developments in his organisation and he has established a very close working relationship with the Chief Constable of the RUC and with General Sir Frank King. He sees this as a useful development as it totally legitimises his operation and will enable him in a difficult situation to put pressure both on the RUC and on the Army. He has managed to get a copy of the orange and green map of Belfast from the RUC and from his description of it, it is the same map that we obtained through the Ordnance Survey Office here and which from reports in the Irish Times seems to be fairly freely available to journalists in Belfast. He hopes to come to Dublin before Christmas to give us a full picture of the present state of his planning. He mentioned that there has been nothing whatsoever done in the other dioceses to plan for an emergency relief situation and he is clearly worried about this. His planning has advanced to the point of designing routes for isolated Catholics to safe areas in the event of a breakdown but there is considerable reluctance in his Committee to give these routes to the Army at this stage. He has an open mind on the question himself and does not want to alienate his Committee by taking a unilateral decision. He also has been working in very close cooperation with the Welfare authorities and has managed to get them to decentralise their stores and move them into isolated areas. He indicated generally that he was getting the maximum possible cooperation from the authorities at present.

I also met Mr. Billy Blease, Secretary of the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. Mr. Blease considers that the mood in the North at the moment amongst both populations is one of a realisation that the Convention will have to work and that there is no other alternative than to make it work. This will exert its own pressure on the politicians when they come to sit around the table and he also is more confident of something positive coming out of the Convention. The Northern Ireland Labour Party Conference was starting that evening and he spoke about it in rather scathing terms. He clearly considers the NILP as a sectarian organisation but not one of any great influence. According to Blease its total membership at present in Northern Ireland is 340 and he clearly considers that it is a rather pathetic pressure group by now.

Blease also said that relations between the organised trade union movement in the North and the CBI had greatly improved. The CBI, following the UWC stoppage and the recent lorry drivers' strike, had begun to see that the classical trade union/employer relationship and confrontation could only take place within the established organisations and the trade unions in the North have regained most of the ground which they lost during the UWC stoppage. I got the clear impression from him that he thinks in the event of a further UWC strike that the business community will not be as ready to run to negotiate with the strikers. He expressed grave concern at the economic situation in the North and said that the balance of employment now was roughly 50% between service industries and manufacturing industries. This was far too high on the service side and despite the fact that it might appear otherwise the industrial situation in the North will probably deteriorate rapidly over the next few months.

I also met Mr. Erskine Holmes, Secretary of the NILP. He estimates the strength of the NILP at about 500 but said that even in good times they never had much more than about 600 paid

up members. He frankly admitted that they had gone for the hard-line Protestant vote and is curiously unaffected by the idea of a Socialist Party being so sectarian in attitude. There is a strong group within the Labour Party who now consider that they should endorse a policy of full integration for Northern Ireland with the UK. He feels this group may win out at the party conference.

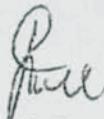
Holmes detects a very strong drift to inactivity in the Northern Ireland Office at present. The performance of the Westminster Ministers is quite pathetic and they are literally doing nothing about day to day matters in the province. There are two possible interpretations of this: one is that they are letting things slide so that when the new Executive is formed they will be able to build up an immediate credit by taking decisions on long awaited problems very quickly. The other more sinister possibility is that the British are callously letting the situation slide at all levels so that their eventual withdrawal may be easier when the chaos becomes widespread.

He is not over-impressed by the sweet reasonableness of John Taylor at present and cynically attributes it to the fact that there is a much greater proportion of moderate voters in North Down than in Fermanagh-South Tyrone and that Taylor now has to play this tune to ensure his survival at the Convention election.

He also spoke to me about Ken Gibson, whom he said had been badly shattered by the Westminster election. If you allowed for personation votes, and he quoted one case to me of a man who voted 17 times in the last election, the real vote which Gibson got was probably no more than 500. There is a revolution going on within the UVF at the moment and Gibson's star is probably in the decline. He represented an elitest and progressive view within the movement and this view has now lost out. He promised to try and arrange a further meeting with Gibson for

me the next time I am in Belfast.

One final piece of information which is probably no more than
current Belfast gossip 



John McColgan

10 December, 1974