

## NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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Meeting between Dr. G. FitzGerald, T.D., Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Rt. Hon. Roy Mason, M.P., Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

London, 24th September 1976

1. The Minister for Foreign Affairs was accompanied by:

Dr. Donal O'Sullivan, Ambassador, London,  
Mr. Seán Donlon, Assistant Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs,  
Mr. John Campbell, Minister, London.

With the Secretary of State were:

Mr. Douglas Janes, Deputy Permanent Secretary, NIO,  
Mr. John Bourn, Under Secretary, NIO,  
Mr. W. Harding, Head, Republic of Ireland Department, FCO,  
Mr. M. Stewart, Private Secretary to the Secretary of State.

The meeting began shortly after 10.00 a.m. and concluded at 11.20 a.m.

2. After welcoming the Minister, Mr. Mason referred to reports in the Irish papers, commenting on the substance of the matter to be discussed. He was disturbed that the press had been briefed in this way. His understanding was that both sides had agreed to answer press queries with a simple confirmation that the meeting was taking place but that nothing further would be said about the matters for discussion. He hoped that there would be no further breaches of understandings on what could be said to the press. This was very necessary to maintain mutual confidence in the future. The Minister replied that there appeared to have been an initial leak from the British Embassy in Dublin to the BBC that the meeting was being held. This had created a difficult situation for us with the coincidence of the SDLP visit to Dublin in the same week. It had been necessary to damp down what could have been damaging speculation on links between the two meetings. We had, in fact, been successful in this and the press comment had been low-key. Mr. Mason accepted this. It was agreed that a press statement after the meeting should state simply that discussions had taken place without going in to substance.



3. Mr. Mason gave an account of his discussions in Northern Ireland since taking up his appointment. His first talks had been with the RUC. He was impressed with the Chief Constable. RUC morale was good and recruitment had been stepped up. The regional crime squads were working well. He was generally satisfied with the RUC's success in bringing charges before the courts.

He had met with the trade unions and industry to discuss Northern Ireland's crucial economic problems. He had had a good meeting with the unions. They were unhappy with the way in which the Northern Ireland Economic Council was working and resented the fact that they had not met the Prime Minister on his visit to the North earlier in the summer. Mr. Callaghan had now arranged to meet them in London on 7th October and a meeting of the Economic Council was planned for 15th October. Before that meeting a report on the economy would be going to all members of the Economic Council and he expected this to receive wide media publicity. The 15th October meeting might well lead to a decision to dissolve the Economic Council in its present form and they would be looking for improved ways to handle consultation on the economy thereafter.

4. He had had talks with all the political parties. As regards the informal OUP/SDLP talks he felt there had been a view on both sides that a definite cutting off of the talks should be avoided. However, after Harry West's statement calling for devolved government on Convention report lines and a meeting with the Prime Minister, and the SDLP's new policy statement, both sides had now gone back into their "fox holes". The Official Unionists, however, seemed to feel the talks were only in abeyance.

He had had a good meeting with the SDLP. He knew many of the party's leaders for some considerable time and had a particularly high regard for Hume whom he knew well. There had been no talk of support for troops-out or withdrawal policies. He understood the SDLP's urgency about a need to fill what they saw as a political vacuum. He had made it very clear to them that he was ready to encourage any views which might come through on power-sharing. He was particularly anxious that this should get across to Gerry Fitt and to the SDLP generally whom he saw as having a useful role to play.



"Strong decisive direct government" was the course for as far as one could see ahead, with devolved government on acceptable terms the aim as soon as political conditions allowed. Northern Ireland Ministers would be spending more time than ever in the Province and would be dealing especially with the serious economic and social problems. He was firmly opposed to any form of "instant reaction" or "gesture" politics. On the law and order front the Government's firm policy would be continued and troop presence maintained at the level required by security needs.

5. He hoped to hold a press conference next week giving his initial assessment of the situation, making it clear that no change in policy was contemplated and placing particular emphasis on Northern Ireland's economic problems.

6. The Minister, in reply, suggested at the outset that Mr. Mason should not be unduly concerned by Mr. Fitt's outburst. Some of Fitt's colleagues had been embarrassed by his statements and upset that a link might be drawn between them and the new policy statement issued by the party. We felt - and Mr. Donlon confirmed this view - that Mr. Fitt's statements had been a result of a personal over-reaction. Concern about a possible higher profile for the Army under Mr. Mason's direction had probably more to do with the outburst than any internal SDLP party tactics on Mr. Fitt's part. The fact was that Mr. Fitt was one of the most clear-sighted members of the SDLP and was acutely conscious of the dangers in the recent SDLP policy statement. He was someone on whom the Secretary of State would be wise to rely for an appreciation of potentially damaging shifts in minority thinking.

The Minister said that there were fundamental dangers in the new position taken by the SDLP. The SDLP had been seriously demoralised by the way in which the informal talks with the Unionists had been broken off. They felt they had had a good understanding with Ardill and Smyth. They did not expect the abrupt cessation of the talks and our information was that even opponents of the talks among the majority had likewise not expected this.

The SDLP policy statement was not, in our view, the result of grass-roots pressure. The pressures came from within the party. Members of the party had become so disillusioned in the face of the



political deadlock, that tendencies of the old-fashioned nationalist wing in the party - always sceptical about the possibility of working for changes within the system - had been decisively strengthened. We were particularly concerned by the fact that those, like Hume and Currie, who had always held fast against "declaration of intent" tendencies in the party, appeared now to have lost the will to do so and seemed totally disillusioned with the present situation. This was a very serious development.

7. Two things were essential for a constructive political strategy in Northern Ireland. Firstly, the unionists must be convinced of Britain's firm intention to stay in Northern Ireland so long as a majority wished it. Secondly, there must be no shadow of doubt that power-sharing government was the only form of devolved government obtainable. There were signs that this strategy was running into difficulties. Unionists, having shown some inclination to talk, were now returning to entrenched positions. They appeared to be gaining some impression from Tory spokesmen, with an eye on party strengths at Westminster, that a Conservative Government might be prepared to give them the kind of devolved government which they have claimed. Tory statements on power-sharing have been showing some haziness and lacking sufficient conviction. The real risk now was that the direct rule situation was not bringing sufficient pressure to bear on the unionists to move towards the partnership concept: but was rather so demoralising the SDLP as to sap their will to pursue political solutions on the lines they have advocated heretofore.

In recent years a key factor in Dublin's success in reversing Irish policy and attitudes of previous decades and bringing about acceptance of a no-reunification without consent policy has been the SDLP's adherence to such a policy. The impact of the Fianna Fáil switch to a declaration-of-intent policy was restricted because the SDLP made its opposition to it clear and there were no significant echoes in public opinion.

8. A change in the SDLP position would have grave implications for the Irish Government. If SDLP disillusionment reaches the stage where the party adopts a declaration of intent policy this will effectively be seen as an adoption of the Fianna Fáil line. Such a situation could



isolate the Irish Government's Northern Ireland policy: an election in these circumstances could return Fianna Fáil to office with the resulting major shift in policy creating serious implications not simply for North-South but also for Anglo-Irish relations.

It was essential that SDLP morale be restored to avoid a further deterioration. The position was not irretrievable but some new initiatives seemed necessary to restore matters. It was essential that both Governments should give very hard thought over the next few weeks to what should be done in this connection.

9. Mr. Mason thanked the Minister for his remarks which had been very helpful. He realised that the SDLP's policy statement marked a new development. It made him all the more anxious to get contacts going with Mr. Fitt who obviously had an important role to play. But how should British policy react?

10. The Minister said that the meeting with the SDLP in Dublin had been useful in allowing the Government to stress to the SDLP the serious implications of their policy and to impress upon them the need to allow time for both Governments to reflect and see what could be done. He was confident that the SDLP had accepted this and that they would not take further steps towards a declaration of intent position in the immediate future, at least before the party's conference in late November.

There were hopeful factors which could ease the situation if used in the right way. There was evident growing moderation in the community in Northern Ireland as a whole. There were clear signs in the unionist camp that they continued to want developments towards devolved government. We should both reflect in the coming weeks to see how a more positive turn could be given to the situation. It might be useful that the two Prime Ministers should meet in October with possibly a further meeting between himself and Mr. Mason to prepare the ground before then.

If anything could be done to convince the Tories of the need to dispel any illusions the unionists might hold about getting devolved government on other than partnership terms this would be important. Mr. Whitelaw was one who could usefully be talked to on these lines.



11. Mr. Mason noted this and said he would see what might be done. He accepted the desirability of trying to get across to the Conservatives the factors the Minister had mentioned. He had had quite a good meeting with Airey Neave the previous evening. Neave had reaffirmed that the bipartisan policy would continue and had made no threats of non-co-operation. He was clearly still preoccupied by his ideas for stepping up the propaganda war against the IRA, changing the laws of evidence and giving publicity to international links with terrorism in Northern Ireland (the "reds under the bed" theory). He had promised to send Mr. Mason a memorandum of his ideas in the fairly near future.
12. Mr. Mason said that it would be a pity if there were to be major political difficulties for the Irish Government at this stage. Policy over the last three years had been "stout and good". Border co-operation was going ahead well but there was perhaps still more to be done. He would like to meet the Minister for Justice, if possible, in a few weeks when he had had the opportunity to fill himself in further. The peace movement was a good sign and the morale of the RUC was also a positive factor. But there were problems ahead especially in relation to the ending of political status for prisoners.
13. The Minister said that we would be glad if Mr. Mason could visit Dublin and repeated his own desire for further talks with Mr. Mason on his return from the United Nations with the eventuality of a meeting between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister in mind.
14. On the security front a major difficulty, in our view, lay in getting hold of the Provisional leadership North and South. We hoped to be able to do more ourselves on this with the new legislation passed by the Oireachtas. No sudden swoop was planned but in the weeks and months after the enactment of the legislation it was hoped that some of the leaders would be caught and locked away for long periods. Mr. Mason intervened to say that his information was that the Provisionals were now badly demoralised at which point the Minister reminded the Secretary of State of our view that a British announcement of the ending of contacts with the IRA would be of great help, more so than ever perhaps in the light of the developments they had discussed. Mr. Mason said he understood our position. Contacts were not taking



place and none were planned. He could go no further than this at the present time but would take our views into account in any future re-assessment.

15. Mr. Mason enquired about the Irish Government's present thinking on the Strasbourg case. The Minister replied that the proceedings were following their course. <sup>WC</sup> He had had to decide whether the case should go to the Council of Ministers or to the Court. We had wished to avoid the dangers of a political hassle if the case had been referred to Ministers. Our decision to refer it to the Court was aimed at depoliticising matters and keeping the case in its legal framework.

<sup>9 Wx</sup>  
He had made it plain that we would be ready to listen to proposals for a settlement from the British side. None had been made and we regretted this. It was now not at all clear that the Court would be required to drop the case even if moves were made towards a settlement. But if the United Kingdom Government had proposals even at this stage our position remained that we would be ready to consider them.

Mr. Janes remarked that the British Government had made it clear from a very early stage that they had taken the action open to them to bring about a settlement. They had gone beyond proposals - they had taken action. They did not see what more they could do but if we had told them what was required they would have been glad to react. They had been given to understand in 1973 that there were prospects of a settlement but this had come to nothing.

The Minister suggested - and Mr. Mason agreed - that there was little point in arguing about what had happened in the past. We had to look to the future. However, legal opinion would not justify the view that it was up to the Irish side to tell the British what proposals they should make. In fact he was quite satisfied that the British side had been left in no doubt as to what we felt was necessary to make a settlement possible.

16. The Minister informed Mr. Mason that contacts we had developed through Arab leaders had brought about a shift in Libyan policy on



support for the IRA. Colonel Khadaffi's recent Newsweek interview confirmed our information that Libya was ready to develop friendly relations and now understood the Irish Government's position on subversive organisations. The Libyans wanted diplomatic relations and we hoped to arrange this on a double accreditation basis with useful results.

17. The Minister remarked that the Taoiseach's visit and President Ford's statement had had significant results in reducing the flow of funds to the IRA from the United States. We continued to urge against British statements on the issue in the United States since the result of these, experience showed, was counter-productive.

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