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Forum on Northern Ireland, Amherst, Mass.
August 28 - September 2, 1975

Report of Acting Consul General, Boston

Further to my telex no. 183 of 28 August, I wish to report that I travelled to Amherst on the afternoon of Saturday, 30 August, and returned on the afternoon of 2 September. Attached is the programme as carried out, as well as a list of actual participants. Since I was present for only part of the programme, and since the Forum has been extensively covered in the Irish Times as well as elsewhere, I propose merely to comment on significant aspects within my experience at the Forum. As instructed, I registered as an observer and did not participate in the public proceedings. I had, however, the opportunity of exchanging views in private with many of the participants. The Information Officer of the British Consulate General in Boston, Mrs. Barbara Eachus, also attended as an observer.

It will be noted that those present included representatives of:-

Paramilitary organizations

Community workers

Academics

Representatives of U. S. and Canadian organizations

Elected representatives and political party members
acting in an individual capacity

Media representatives - American, Irish, and British

There was, as you are aware, no official participation by Irish or British Government members nor by the Catholic Church. Neither were there representatives of either the Provisional IRA or the UVF. The nominees of the former had been denied U. S. visas, the latter just did not show up.

There was representation from NORAID, the supportive group for the Provisional IRA in the U. S., as well as from the Republican Clubs (Officials) and Canadian Loyalist groups, but not from other American Irish organizations, although some of these latter had supported the Forum financially and, according to Patrick O'Malley, all had been invited. It was expected that NORAID would make a statement in the absence of Provisional Sinn Fein, but in the event, they did not do so. Among their delegation was Father Seán McManus, at present attached to Mission (Redemptorist) Church in Boston.

All shades of Loyalist/Unionist opinion were represented and participated actively in the proceedings.

Proceedings

The two high spots of the conference were the presentation on behalf of IRSP by Seamus Costello on the first full day (before I had arrived) when he gave a virtuoso marathon performance that elicited grudging tributes even from his opponents; and the release by the UDA on the last day but one of the Frommer policy document of March 1975



broaching the subject of negotiated independence for Northern Ireland, which was one of the most widely reported contributions to the Forum (copy herewith).

It was noticeable that the assumption throughout the conference was more often than not that the established institutions - the Governments, the Convention, the Churches, among them, were irrelevant. Criticism of, or attacks on these institutions (other than the SDLP or the Catholic Church, which were attacked directly) was taken as read rather than made overtly. Criticism of the SDLP was provoked to some extent by the participation of Messrs. McGinniss and Donnelly. That of the Catholic Church (in the Republic) arising out of Professor John Whyte's scheduled lecture.

There was criticism from many quarters of the concept of power sharing as "undemocratic" - by Glen Barr of UDA, by Seamus Costello, who described it as "office sharing", by Pat Duffy of ICTU, by the Official Sinn Fein, and by NICRA. A Bill of Rights on the other hand was proposed independently by several groups, including Official Sinn Fein, NICRA, and the Ulster Council of Civil Liberties. This was occasionally described as an alternative to power sharing, but it was a measure of the lack of basic interaction between opposing groups that even likemindedness on the necessity for such a measure did not lead to any give and take (see below).

Informal Communication

Outside the formal sessions, contacts were friendly and easy. On all sides, it was said that the contacts established would be the most useful result of the Forum; e.g., a "hot line" system between paramilitaries of opposing factions would be facilitated in future crisis situations, particularly in preventing sectarian assassinations.

The allegation that the Irish Government had played a role in the refusal of visas to the Provisional Sinn Fein invitees was widely made in private. I was told by several people there was "evidence" to support this allegation. I, of course, in reply cited the statement of the U. S. Embassy denying any interference. The source of the "evidence" in question was apparently Mr. Seán Hopkins, Campaign for Democracy in Ulster. He claimed to have it from a personal contact in the U. S. administration (the Committee to Control Terrorism) that the Irish Government had intervened. At the same time, he was aware that the Provos had capitalized on the refusal of visas to the Drumms and Joe Cahill by refusing to suggest other representatives who might have been acceptable to the U. S. authorities. Mr. Hopkins was at pains to emphasize to me that the effect of the alleged role of the Irish Government in the visa refusals was to raise doubts in the minds of the UDA that the Irish Government were seriously interested in negotiations for a settlement.

Private Conversations

The following are notes from memory on some private conversations which might be of interest:-

Andy Tyrrie -

Andy Tyrrie approached me to ask what my views were. He made some remarks related to the UDA "Frommer" statement which I had not at that time seen. He referred to his interest in discouraging



undesirables in the UDA, which I took to mean sectarian assassins. He expressed the view that peace movements did more harm than anything else and referred to people connected with those movements as "snobs." In reply to my question as to whether he found the conference useful, he mentioned the personal contacts aspect.

Seamus Costello -

During a conversation, in the course of which he harangued at length against the Irish Government, in reply to my question as to what he considered the government should do, said,

- 1) make statement to show interest in Northern Ireland and,
- 2) show itself willing to take action to reassure the Loyalists (e.g., vis-a-vis the Catholic Church issues) so as to reduce Loyalist tension.

Liam de Paor -

Liam de Paor thought the Irish Government should, to a greater extent, develop its own policies independent of British Government policy.

Alban Maginness of SDLP -

He thought the "southern" Government lacked credibility on the subject of Northern Ireland, but he had been reassured by Deputy Paddy Harte's contributions at the Forum.

According to Mr. McGinness, overemphasis by the Irish Government on condemnation of the IRA is resented by Northern Catholics because they feel themselves threatened from other quarters altogether (presumably Loyalist extremists and BA). They particularly object to overemphasis by the Taoiseach and the Minister for Posts and Telegraphs since they are not convinced the Ministers in question are sincerely interested in their well being.

Desmond Fennell -

He made predictably disparaging remarks about "my" traitorous Government.

Media Participation in the Forum

It will be noted from the list of participants that Irish and British journalists were proportionately more strongly represented than American. The absence of all but a few media participants from the U. S. was a severe blow to the organizers, and while it bore out their claim of media indifference to the Northern Ireland question, it effectively negated their objective of remedying that situation.

Peter O'Malley claimed that a key factor in the non-participation of the American press was that out-of-state invitees, e.g., the Washington Star, would and did follow the lead of the Boston Globe. The Globe, however, did not send a participant on the advice, again according to Mr. O'Malley, of Brendan Malin. (I can confirm from my own knowledge that Brendan Malin had an unfavourable view of the Forum throughout and turned down out of hand the invitation sent to him).



The reports on the Forum which appeared in the Globe were based on the contributions of a "stringer" - Michael Chinoy - and Associated Press.

It will be seen from the programme that a session was held on media coverage of the Northern Ireland situation and the consensus was that it is of simplistic and distorted quality probably because it is of marginal importance and interest to editors.

Media Coverage of the Forum

Coverage in the immediate (Massachusetts) area was reasonably wide in scope. Cuttings of the more significant articles were sent to the Department at the time. Many of the participants were interviewed on local radio and TV and a press conference was held, which may have resulted in wider reportage via the wire services and networks.

Presumably there may also be some in-depth analysis at a later stage by the journalists who attended. News of the reports in the British sensational press of alleged arms-buying activities by some participants were received on the last day but one of the Forum and caused dismay among the organizing committee.

General Assessment

There was no indication that the Forum achieved anything significant in the political sense even within its own unrepresentative terms of reference. The air of easy sociability and indeed mutual respect among representatives of opposing points of view did not seem to be paralleled by any meetings of minds not to speak of concessions on basic positions.

Rev. Martin Smyth, the Imperial Grand Master of the Orange Lodge, was unyielding under questioning in his defence of the Order.

Seamus Costello's call for a ^alater conference of all groups "with armed capability" was rejected by Glenn Barr, who stated categorically that he had no mandate from the inner council of the UDA to engage in talks with Republicans. Costello, again, after close cut and thrust debate lasting many hours, did back down somewhat on advocacy of violence to achieve political ends. At another time, he spoke of "politicizing the existing guns" rather than "taking the guns out of politics."

Tomás MacGiolla's call for a peace conference of organizations devoted to working class interests received no response either from UDA or IRSP. (A copy of his address is attached).

The total rejection by Sam Smyth (as well as others) of the Official IRA thesis as expounded by MacGiolla was all the more striking inasmuch as both are proponents of a Bill of Rights.

The most significant development of position was probably expressed in the UDA "Frommer" document which, however, was merely released at the Forum and did not originate there.

The Forum achieved its purpose of bringing together representatives of many groups involved in the conflict with the consequent likelihood of a human element in the future relationships of the people in question with each other. In this sense, it fulfilled its educational



purpose and may have achieved a humanizing effect at a person-to-person level. The accord between UDA and IRSP on mutual prevention of sectarian assassinations was a high point in this sense. It was generally agreed that even though similar gatherings had been held in Ireland, the Amherst meeting was particularly useful at the person-to-person level. It was also noted that this was the first occasion on which formal presentations had been made by such a variety of groups in the presence of others.

The Forum did not succeed in attracting American opinion makers from the media, and to that extent did not achieve its objective of reaching the American public through these opinion makers. As I reported prior to the event, the attitude to the proposal among the local American Irish community was, on the whole, favourable, but whether that public, as well as the American public in general, has its knowledge of Northern Ireland affairs widened by the Forum, will depend on the quality of in-depth media analysis, as well as follow-up activities by the organizers. In this connection, it is to be noted that the proceedings were recorded on video tape, and it is intended that they be published. The organizers also intend to carry on the Forum activities in some form or another.

Organizational Details

Mr. Peter O'Malley showed me a copy of the budget statement. Total expenses amounted to \$90,000 approximately (not \$60,000, as stated in a Globe article). Most of the money has yet to be raised, according to Mr. O'Malley.

Considering the reservations expressed in advance about the viability of the project and considering the difficulties of financing, it is only fair to place on record that the organization was impressive and that the programme functioned smoothly throughout. The splendid resources of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst where the Forum was held were of vital importance in this respect. The liaison between the Committee and the University was Professor Maurice Donohue of the School of Government, formerly President of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Carmel B. Heaney

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