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Digest of Foreign Press Coverage of Ireland

(Excerpt)

No. 8/77

Reports received by Information Section, Department of Foreign Affairs, on foreign press and media coverage of Ireland during the month of August are summarised below.

Introduction

As a result of the Queen's visit there was a dramatic increase in coverage of Northern Irish affairs by the international media.

President Carter's statement and the rumours that preceded it were the dominant Irish stories internationally later in the month.

The announcement that Monsignor Tomás Ó Fiaich is to be the next Primate of All Ireland was widely noted with particular prominence given to his views on Irish unity.

The Queen's Visit to the North of Ireland

Foreign coverage of the Queen's visit was very extensive with the emphasis on the massive security build-up and the IRA threats. Most editors felt that the visit was calculated to reinforce the links binding the North of Ireland to Great Britain. But, perhaps the most interesting aspect of the coverage was the extent to which it revealed the state of international attitudes to the Northern problem.

British press coverage in the days leading up to the visit reflected mounting fears that it would be the occasion for extreme violence. The Daily Telegraph (8 August) saw the visit as demonstrating Britain's commitment to preserving the Union against those who sought to overthrow it by violence and treachery. A Times leader (10 August), entitled "A part of the United Kingdom", maintained that the Queen could not recognise a no-go area anywhere in the State. The Daily Express (8 August) supported the visit asserting that the Queen's absence would be taken as a token of the coming dissolution of the Union. A Guardian (10 August) editorial argued forcefully that the visit was politically neutral. It was in no way a reassertion of anything, merely an acknowledgement of the union that exists and was not intended to encourage one subject against another. The first day of the visit was, according to the Daily Telegraph (11 August), a triumph but the Guardian emphasised the negative aspects of Republican violence on the streets. The Daily Mail, Daily Express, Sun and Daily Mirror of the same day all based their stories on the simple contrast between the peaceful nature of the royal visit and the violence of the demonstration against it. With the end of the visit, the Guardian (13 August) expressed amazement at the IRA's failure to deliver on its threats. Even SDLP politicians, the paper said, had been confounded by the IRA's failure to terrorize. Senator Cruise O'Brien thought (Observer, 14 August) that the visit contained some sweetness, even for the Catholic community. By underpinning the Union the trip had prevented Protestant disaffection and the drift towards a UDI-type situation where Catholics would grievously suffer. Mary Holland (New Statesman, 26 August) stated that the royal visit and the British government's reneging on power-sharing were forcing the SDLP to "plant the flag" and forecast that this disregard for Catholic susceptibilities would result in a new upsurge of violence.

In order to put the visit into perspective, Belgian newspapers found it necessary to explain why the Queen was welcomed by one section and rejected by the other. The result was possibly the clearest historical exposé the Belgian people have had for some time as to the reasons for the conflict and, in particular, the reason why Northern Nationalists might find the visit objectionable. Seven of the major dailies carried front page photographs on 9 August of the Republican News cover with the caption "I cannot forget that I was crowned Queen of England and

Northern Ireland - She won't!" The IRA's slogan "Queen of Death" caught the headlines. Claude de Groulart wrote a series of articles on the visit for Le Soir (11, 12, 13 August). He pointed out that though the Queen was visiting Ulster she would not see the real Ulster or meet the real people (except the few hand-picked guests). He also emphasised that the Queen had only met the Protestant section of the population explaining that the Catholics do not wish to give up their right to possess a long term hope of future Irish unity or to forgo their Irish identity. La Libre Belgique felt that the Queen's presence would serve to reaffirm to the IRA and those of the Catholic population who support them that the British Government would not allow reunification with the South against the wishes of two thirds of the population. Le Peuple in an editorial entitled "Queen of the Protestants" wrote that "Elizabeth whether she likes it or not is a symbol of all that is hateful to the Ulster Catholics....the only way of eliminating terrorism in Ulster is to remove the racism there and this is impossible. When will the British Government agree to internationalise the question of Ulster by a constructive dialogue with the Republic of Ireland and the Government in Dublin?"

In France major coverage of the visit had the effect of drawing attention to the suffering of the people of the North and the complexity of the situation in a spectacular way. Only Le Monde tried to describe the visit as an almost ordinary royal occasion. Victor Franco of Journal du Dimanche (14 August) contributed a page and a half of highly emotional prose speaking of the areas where the Queen could not go, where the British army is challenged by eight year old children. Serge Chauvel-Lerous in Le Figaro (13-14 August) spoke of the anguish, unemployment and anarchy which will continue in Ulster after the royal visit. He felt that the new Irish Government is less willing than ever to engage itself in the Republican cause, because of the possibility that it might find itself confronted by a hostile and violent Protestant minority in a united Ireland context. La Croix (14 August) spoke of the relative success of the IRA, with the moderate Catholics pushed to the touch line because it was politically impossible to accept the invitation to meet the Queen due to the days chosen.

Roland Hill in the German newspaper Stuttgarter Zeitung (9 August) wrote "for the one and a half million (sic) loyalist Protestants

the visit is a confirmation of the continuation of the Union and a dispersal of growing fears that the British government might be on the verge of capitulation to the terrorists". Fritz Wirth of Die Welt (11 August) felt that "Every bomb that goes off for the duration of this two-day visit is not only an unmusical protest against the visit but also a signal of victory over the British occupation and from such signals the IRA has drawn its strength for generations past." Rainer Bornhorst for General Anzeiger (12 August) wrote "Behind the idyllic scenery, the peaceful villages lies the Ulster which the Queen will not see and the one which will continue, the terrorism and violence of decades, long after she has departed for her Scottish retreat in Balmoral". Karl Heinz Wocker (Die Zeit and Stuttgarter Zeitung 13, 14 August) in the course of articles on the visit remarks "The new government in Dublin is still busily engaged in deciding whether or not to press for the British declaration of intent to withdraw from Northern Ireland. The enormous extent of the Lynch victory in the General Election with the, by Irish standards, staggering majority of twenty seats makes attempts at moderation difficult. Northern Ireland was hardly a factor in the election but then prestige remains a constant factor in politics even though the old Irish Republicanism grows weaker and less relevant as time goes by. The De Valera generation are now almost all dead but the geopolitical logic of a United Ireland remains and it is something that cannot be denied by Britain. The moderates in Dublin believe that the declaration of intent without any set time limit remains the best way to offer something to the demands of the Republicans and also provides the best way of serving the interests of pragmatism and rationalism".

Giorgio Porro in the Italian Il Messaggero (10 August) was fearful lest the offence given to large numbers of anti-violence but not pro-British Catholics will destroy the very fragile threads of dialogue being knit by moderates between the two communities. The same correspondent contributed a short piece "IRA: fighting for fifty years to free Ulster" giving a historical sketch which traced the IRA from its origins in Sinn Féin in 1912, through 1916, 1919, 1923, (when "the movement became clandestine and for many years kept alive a unique legend of heroic nationalism"), 1956, 1962 etc. He ends by pointing out that the two wings take in unnumerable groupings which go from pure patriotism to Guevarismo interpreted in the Celtic way". On 12 August Porro reported that the Queen's speech was not substantially different from that of George V in 1921, when the circumstances also were not very different - "More than half a century has passed and in Ulster nothing has changed". Follow-up articles in the Italian press made some interesting points: Corriere Della Sera (13 August) "felt that British politicians of all colours seem to regard the 'Irish question' as an immutable fact and they are unmoved by the continued need for military occupation or by the violence compared to which the efforts of the Red Brigades in Italy are like a summer tea party". The paper lists the reasons why it considers the Northern Ireland problem to be international rather than internal, including "the

continual passage of arms supplies, and men trained for terrorism across the open frontier with the Ireland of Dublin (Eire)". Fabio Galvano in La Stampa (14 August) described the visit as a chess game everyone lost... Catholic nationalists, because of the reconfirmation of British rule and the loss of face due to the failure to carry out the threatened terrorist programme; the British who could only protect their sovereign with 32,000 troops; and the Protestants who celebrated not the jubilee but their own irredentism. He considered this last - the Protestant extremist confirmation of an attitude that for years has made them, in the eyes of many foreigners, oppressors of the Catholic minority rather than victims of terrorism - the most disappointing element of the visit.

H. J. Nimtz writing in the Luxembourger Wort (6 August) said that the Protestant community wanted the visit to go ahead in order to demonstrate their loyalty and constitutional attachment to the United Kingdom. The Catholic minority, on the other hand, did not want the visit to take place in order to emphasise the difference between Ulster and the rest of the United Kingdom.

The Dutch De Volkskrant (10 August) claimed that to cancel the visit would mean a victory "for the militant Catholic IRA who do not tolerate the English Queen on Irish soil". Bert van Oosterhout in Algemeen Dagblad (11 August) referring to the Queen's courage remarked that "at the same time this regal attitude strengthens the extreme Protestants in their conviction that they are in the right. It is their greatest triumph since British soldiers killed 13 Roman Catholics in Londonderry on Bloody Sunday five years ago. The irony of fate ordains that the same triumphant Protestants have repeatedly murdered the soldiers of the Queen".

The Austrian Die Presse (9 August) was certain that "to call off the visit now would mean triumph for the IRA who see the Queen as a symbol of foreign rule, and for the Loyalists of Northern Ireland only confirmation of their suspicions that their loyalty to the Crown is not returned". The Kurier (10 August) carried a report stating that "the IRA who are fighting for separation of the province from Britain regard the monarch as a symbol of British colonialism and as an abettor of the pro-British Protestant population in Northern Ireland". A Buckingham Palace spokesman was quoted as saying that the Queen's visit should underline the "British sovereignty over Northern Ireland".

The Norwegian Aftenposten (11, 12 August) carried a series of articles contrasting the ceremonial of the visit with the street fighting provoked by the IRA. Portuguese newspapers reported in a purely factual manner on the visit with the exception of the weekly Expresso (13 August) which concluded that the visit had been rather meaningless since the Queen had not met the people as on jubilee visits elsewhere.

The Spanish ABC (9 August) noted that a great disadvantage of the trip was its timing between two dates which are "celebrated with violence"

in Northern Ireland. Arriba of the same day pointed out that the visit was strictly a protocol one without any contact with the Irish people, "with the Catholics and Protestants who are daily fighting in the streets of Belfast". The paper attributed a new IRA bomb to a "specialist resident in the Republic of Ireland close to the frontier". The London correspondent of El Pais (9 August) stated that the IRA had recruited its sympathisers, "who had brought with them explosives to be used in the major cities", from the South.

The visit gave Northern Irish affairs a prominence in the Swiss media which they had gradually been losing for some time past. Jean Gaud writing in 24 Heures of Lausanne (10 August) felt that while it was logical that the Queen should visit her subjects in all parts of her kingdom during her jubilee year, her visit to Northern Ireland could only be seen, in the context of its nine-year old civil war, as a gesture of political support for the Loyalist camp. Both the Luzerner Neueste Nachrichten and Der Landbote of Winterthur featured an opinion piece by Thomas Feitknecht (11 August) in which he said that the March 1973 referendum had shown that a large majority of the population was loyal to the Crown and as such the Queen was right to visit them.

The Canadian Montreal Gazette (12 August) carried reports from Nicholas Hills in Belfast in which he stated: "Nine years of the troubles have given the Loyalist population of Belfast little to cheer about. Their parliament has been destroyed and their communities overrun by the paramilitaries. Queen Elizabeth in her determination to show that she rules Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom is sending the Protestants a political message - and they appreciate it". In an editorial the Ottawa Journal (13 August) agreed that "the symbolism of the Queen's visit showed that Northern Ireland is still part of the United Kingdom. But it is an open secret that in England, Wales and Scotland, if a plebiscite on the subject were held, a majority of her subjects would vote to let it go".

In the United States, Charles Glass of the Christian Science Monitor (9 August) asked "Why is Queen Elizabeth coming if she is unable to meet the ordinary people, and if it will be the ordinary citizen who will be the most likely target for any headline grabbing terrorist attacks". An editorial in the Chicago Sun Times (11 August) felt "the visit inflamed hostility when some residents - Protestant and Catholic - were groping towards harmony". Michael Killian in a Chicago Tribune commentary (16 August) praising the visit wrote: "For British policy, aided by the similarly sensible Irish policy of the Dublin Government, has been working in Northern Ireland. The policy is based on the belief that unification of the Irish island may ultimately be the best possible thing - but not until the one million well-armed Protestants in the North agree that it is a good thing". The Wall Street Journal (11 August) was of the opinion that "the

jubilee visit underscored British sovereignty over the disputed province which militant Catholics want united with the largely Catholic Irish Republic to the South." The Daily News (14 August) reported that "The orchestrated two-day visit which came off without a serious hitch, save for the ruffled feelings of Ulster's large Catholic minority, drew more attention in the media than the British Government's fresh economic offensive in Northern Ireland.....the Protestants, who want no part of a union with the largely Catholic Irish Republic, welcomed the timing of the visit which was set in 1975 by a Labor party government". Denis Hamill had an emotional piece in Village Voice (22 August) contrasting excerpts from the Queen's Coleraine speech with material on the deaths of 14 year old Paul McWilliams and a British soldier. He remarked that "as a precaution for the Queen's arrival, 23 Roman Catholics have been arrested and charged with 60 different murders. No Protestants have been arrested". Referring to renewed violence Hamill concluded: "With the Queen of England gone, the British Army is back to 'normal operations'. And those Irish people who refuse to subject themselves to the classification of 'loyal subjects' are back to 'normal operations'. *The Jubilee is over".

An editorial in the San Francisco Examiner described the visit as "a setback for the Irish Republican Army Provisionals, a tiny fanatical minority among Irish Catholics". The Los Angeles Times in an editorial saw the visit as a reassurance to Protestants of "Britain's professed commitment to remain in Ulster" and to Catholics of "a measure of security that would be lost if London washed its hands of the whole affair". The Idaho Free Press used the occasion to point out that the image of the "Emerald Isle" was now indelibly stained with blood. The Washington Post (12 August) had an article by Bernard D. Nossiter who felt that in one sense the Queen's trip, "the last of her silver jubilee tours, was a success. The Queen hardened those Protestants who are eager to maintain the link with Britain.....but the central issue of this trip was posed tonight by Gerry Fitt, a member of Parliament who is staunchly anti-IRA and the leading Catholic politician in the province. Fitt said the massive security protection showed that the Queen leaves a deeply divided province behind her..... In contrast her grandfather, George V, travelled through the streets of Belfast in an open touring car 56 years ago, Moreover, there was a fully-fledged civil war going on at the time, one that led to the creation of the Catholic Republic of Ireland".

The visit received widespread front page coverage in Argentina where reports highlighted the hostility felt towards the visit by the minority and presented the British Army in a professionally restrained peace-keeping role. Agency reports carried in the Iranian Kayhan International and Tehran Journal dwelt on what was described as a triumph for the Queen.

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Japanese newspaper readers were left with the impression that concerted and wide-ranging attacks on the security forces took place. For example, the Nihon Keizai Shimbun claimed that "terrorist activities increased very much". The Asahi Shimbun reported that in Northern Ireland the Queen is known as the "Queen of Death". The Japan Times (12 August) stated that "the outlawed IRA's provisional wing, fighting a bloody guerilla war to throw out the British, had vowed to disrupt the royal visit which they consider reinforces British sovereignty in the province".

The Soviet press used the occasion of the Queen's visit yet again to feature allegations of mistreatment of detainees, the hypocrisy of London about human rights and the terror campaign of the Protestant "ultras". Writing in Pravda (10 August), the paper's London correspondent said that the Queen's visit coincided with the sixth anniversary of the introduction of internment. This practice, he continued, "which drew loud protests from both the British and foreign public was officially stopped in 1975. However the newspaper Morning Star writes that it in effect continues under another name". The commentary section of Izvestia (11 August) stated that the situation in Ulster was once again becoming aggravated as a result of the Queen's visit. It remarked that the Protestant "ultras use the present British policy which they find suits them to unleash a terrorist campaign against the Catholic minority. At the same time the ultras organise explosions, acts of arson and other kinds of provocation on the other side of the border - in Ireland".