

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2007/116/750
Creation Date(s):	[22 September 1977]
Extent and medium:	5 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.

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

Meeting with S.D.L.P. 22 September,
1977.

1. The Taoiseach accompanied by the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Economic Planning and Development met a delegation from the S.D.L.P. consisting of Messrs. G. Fitt, M.P., J. Hume, A. Currie, S. Mallon and D. McAreeavy in the Council Chamber, Government Buildings on Thursday the 22nd September at 6 p.m. The following officials were also present, Messrs. R. McDonagh, S. Donlon of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Messrs. D. Nally and F. Murray, Department of the Taoiseach. The Taoiseach welcomed the delegation and asked Mr. Fitt to give a summary of the present situation in Northern Ireland.
2. In his opening remarks Mr. Fitt referred to the absence of political movement in Northern Ireland which he said was creating a dangerous vacuum. If this situation did not change he saw no role for the future of constitutional politics in the North. The Unionists consider that they have the exclusive right to rule and their current policy is no power sharing with Republicans or with any group or body who have any semblence of a Republican ideology even if that group or body accept that an all Ireland Republic may not come into existence for a hundred years. The S.D.L.P. have tried to make a success of consensus politics through their participation in the Northern Ireland Executive. Since the Executive fell, Unionist policy has been, in short, no power sharing with non Unionists and the return of Stormont. If that objective is not attainable the Unionists will then accept total integration within the U.K. In this regard the Speaker's Conference established earlier this summer was a particularly worrying symptom for the Nationalist population. It suggested an unwelcome move towards total integration. There was considerable bitterness and frustration not only among the leadership of the S.D.L.P. but also at grass roots level at the present integrationist tendencies. Unlike the Unionists the nationalist community had no second option such as integration. The nationalist community had but one option to live in Northern Ireland and evolve eventually into a reunified country.
3. Mr. Fitt pointed out that the British Government are in effect subsidising Unionist intransigence at present. The stated policy of the Government was power-sharing. If the British Government are unable to persuade the Unionists to accept and work this policy then the S.D.L.P. would have to force the Government to face up to the realities of life in Northern Ireland. Their recent policy document entitled 'Facing Reality' did not redefine party policy but was an exact reiteration of earlier policies. It did however take account of the fact that in recent years the Irish dimension did perhaps appear to have a somewhat lower profile than at present. "We have been driven into the position of having to become more green because the orange men are becoming more orange" - Mr. Fitt said. This year was not the best of times for the non-Unionist people of Northern Ireland. There had been the usual number of provocative parades, the Speaker's Conference and the Queen's official visit. In explaining his Party's attitude to the latter event Mr. Fitt explained that the nationalist people did not see the Queen in her

- 2 -

role as Head of State. Rather they saw her as Head of the Unionist tribe. Mr. Fitt went on to say that he felt that the reservations which he had expressed on Mr. Roy Mason's appointment as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland were fully justified with the attitude adopted by him and the policies which he advocated since he succeeded Mr. Merlyn Rees. Mr. Rees in his view did not bend over backwards to please the Unionists. He had told them on several occasions that they would get no more seats at Westminster. Mr. Mason was now on the other hand seen to be four square behind the Unionists. His attitude was "If you can agree on a solution come to me and I will rubber stamp it". However the S.D.L.P. or the nationalist community did not create the Northern Ireland problem initially. Therefore they could not be expected to produce solutions to it of their own accord now.

4. Mr. Fitt referred to the decrease in violence in recent times and thought that this would influence British thinking along the lines that there was no urgency in seeking an accommodation between majority and minority communities in Northern Ireland at present. He asked that the Taoiseach would lay great stress on the last paragraph of his Party's document - 'Facing Reality' - during his meeting with Mr. Callaghan on the 28th September. This paragraph refers to the necessity for cooperation on socio-economic matters as well as cooperation on security matters The Unionists cannot afford to refuse economic cooperation. This would in effect be cooperation between two sovereign governments. Mr. Fitt urged the Taoiseach to impress on the British Prime Minister that if the Unionists wanted to remain intransigent in their current attitudes they must do so without British Government guarantees. He felt that the S.D.L.P. were entitled to some consideration from the British Government. Through their participation in constitutional politics they had in effect to keep the lid on the situation in Northern Ireland as best they could and had been successful in keeping a considerable number of Catholics out of the I.R.A. Finally on the question of withdrawal, Mr. Fitt said that his Party's attitude on this was that they were not in favour of withdrawal at this time. They would of course favour this solution ultimately at some undefined date in the future but for the moment withdrawal was not the course they would advocate just now.
5. The Taoiseach thanked Mr. Fitt for his elaboration on the situation in the North as he saw it at present. Both he and the Government were very fully conscious of the vacuum situation there and the frustration and needs of the S.D.L.P. He hopes that the S.D.L.P. would remain as a viable political party and realise fully that it must have a forum within which it could play its rightful role in Northern Ireland politics. It was precisely because of the vacuum in Northern Ireland that his party had published its policy on Northern Ireland in 1975. He understood clearly what Mr. Fitt said on the matter of intransigence. In fact in the past he had referred to this in the context of the negative guarantees given by the British Government to the Unionists. The present position could not go on for ever and eventually there would have to be some accommodation. He enquired as to the

current position in relation to the Speaker's Conference and in reply Mr. Fitt said that to date there had been but one meeting and he was going to do his best to stall proceedings. Mr. Hume intervened at this point to say that the party would make a strong case to the Conference on the implications of changing the critical representation at Westminster in so far as Northern Ireland is concerned. Mr. Fitt said there were 21 M.P.s on the Conference and that its proceedings were confidential. It was recognised that all political parties should have an opportunity to put their points of view to the Conference. In reply to a query from the Taoiseach as to whether Northern Ireland would be entitled to more seats, Mr. Fitt said that their estimation was that Northern Ireland could receive 18 seats as a likely outcome of the Conference's deliberations. However this would do nothing to solve the basic problem. The Taoiseach made the point that this was in effect a milestone in the wrong direction.

6. Mr. John Hume spoke about the need for political parties to have platforms from which they could voice their policies and seek to influence public opinion generally. He pointed out that the S.D.L.P. had always taken a strong stand against violence but in this they had received no response from the Unionists. The Queen's visit had improved Unionists' morale. As he saw it the British Government had no long term policy for Northern Ireland. All policies adopted to date had been unsuccessful and in effect the British had got nothing out of their pledge to the Unionists only trouble. He said it was important that Dublin's right to be involved in any solution to the political difficulties in Northern Ireland must be established. If Dublin and London could go ahead on cross-border cooperation this would in his view make the Unionists uneasy. It would add to the pressure that was already there for some form of devolution. The British position at the moment was to do nothing as this was the safest policy. On security their policy was one of Ulsterisation - increase the numbers and role of the R.U.C. and the U.D.R. and withdraw the regular army. In Mr. Hume's view this policy must be stopped. He advocated the wrecking of the U.D.R. If this could be achieved then the British would not be able to get their troops out. He spoke of putting on massive pressure for complete re-vetting of all members of the U.D.R. and in this context he referred to recent statements from judges of records of criminal activities of members of that force which called for investigation. His party would not advocate the disbandment of the U.D.R. but rather that there should be an investigation of its current personnel; discharges from the ranks of certain persons; and a tighter screening of applicants for admission to the force. A major information approach to the British press on the need for a critical review of the U.D.R. would have to be made.
7. The next matter raised by the delegation was the question of cross-border cooperation. Mr. Currie said that they would like to send a small delegation down to meet appropriate Ministers to discuss this. The Taoiseach mentioned that the reaction received from the British side at the preliminary official meeting prior to his meeting with Mr. Callaghan was not very enthusiastic in this regard. The British side had expressed reservations about formalised cross-

border cooperation because of the political difficulties involved in so far as Northern interests were concerned. In effect they were more anxious to see the present system of informal consultations continuing. Mr. Fitt mentioned that the British were alleging that the Irish Government were dragging its feet on economic and social cooperation.

8. Mr. Mallon said that there was no way the S.D.L.P. could remain a viable party unless there was some change or break in the current situation. The British were asking the S.D.L.P. to do the impossible - what successive British Governments had been unable to achieve to date. The nationalist community morale was at a low level because of the following:- disenfranchisement (no local political forum); the Ulsterisation of security; brutality at Castlereagh Barracks; 3,000 in jail mostly from minority community; unemployment at its highest level in minority community; and the Speaker's Conference. In his opinion paragraphs 2 and 3 of page 3 of the Party's policy document were all important. If the British did not live to their promises the S.D.L.P. would "go out of business in the long term". The blockage in the North was that the Unionist population would not seek a mandate from the electorate at large for consensus politics. The S.D.L.P. for their part had sought cooperation and consensus but efforts to date had ended in failure. In his view the ultimate consequence of a continuation of this situation was further support for the I.R.A. and worse.

9. The Taoiseach enquired about the alleged deal with the Unionists at Westminster. Mr. Fitt said that he did not know exactly whether or not there had been any definite deal as such. They did not think that there was any formal deal but rather a "mirage of getting something".

10. The Minister for Foreign Affairs enquired whether Mr. Fitt had any encouragement from his recent discussion with Mr. Callaghan. Mr. Fitt said that he had impressed on the Prime Minister the necessity for making some gesture to the minority and the necessity of looking at British guarantees. In relation to the Molyneux Plan Mr. Fitt said that his party did not see this as a step to a legislature. There would he pointed out however be increased frustration if a "talking shop" were set up without any real powers.

11. The Taoiseach referred again to cross-border cooperation and asked that the S.D.L.P. present to the Government specific proposals in this connection. Mr. Currie said in this regard that the British Government were alleging that the Irish Government were dragging their feet on cross-border cooperation and in particular that civil servants in Dublin were not very enthusiastic about the idea. He also made the point that it was very important for the Irish Government and the S.D.L.P. that lines of communication be kept open with Mrs. Thatcher and that contact be made with members of her Party additional to Messrs Airey Neave and John Biggs Davison. The Minister for Economic Planning and Development said that he fully agreed with this idea. The EEC was there for practical involvement and if the principle could be established the Government could work out proposals. The

- 5 -

Taoiseach expressed criticism of the lack of any progress in the EEC sphere in so far as the Northern situation was concerned. The Minister for Foreign Affairs mentioned that some governments were expressing lively interest in the matter but it was felt that any suggestion or initiative would have to come from a government other than that of the United Kingdom or the Republic.

12. The Carter initiative was also referred to and the Minister for Foreign Affairs mentioned that his Canadian counterpart had indicated during his recent visit that his country would also be anxious to support the line taken by President Carter but for their own reasons would not wish to come in on his heels just yet. Mention was made of the forthcoming visit to the United States by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mr. Mason.