

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2009/120/1972
Creation Date(s):	April 1979
Extent and medium:	6 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open
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STEERING NOTE

Northern Ireland

General

There is a clear tendency among Irish-Americans to view the Northern Ireland problem in very simplistic terms. They tend to regard the British presence in Northern Ireland as the only problem and assume that the only path to a solution lies in exerting maximum pressure to end this presence. There is a tendency to identify with the romantic image of the 'freedom-fighter' extending on occasion to active support for violence. Little or no allowance is made for the strength of unionist sentiment or the explosive nature of inter-community tensions in Northern Ireland. Developments which can be fitted readily into these preconceived modes of thinking have a strong impact on Irish-Americans thinking e.g. the Long Kesh protest as an example of British persecution. On the other hand Irish-Americans find it difficult to understand policies which take account of the complexity of the problem, in particular the need for sensitivity to unionist fears and for patient reconciliation work, and the more extreme elements often ascribe such policies to ulterior motives or subservience to British interests. Many U.S. politicians even among those interested in the Irish problem may be more exposed to the type of views just described than to other sources of information and consequently their ideas may often reflect these simplistic views. Accordingly there might be some advantage in contacts with members of the delegation of highlighting aspects of Government policy which would help to correct this tendency. Such points might include:

Historical Background:

The roots of the problem go far back in history to at least the early 17th century. History has left us a complex situation in which all Ireland has close links with Britain but in which the vast majority of Irish people persisted, with ultimate partial success, in their demand for an independent Irish State, as the political expression of distinct Irish nationhood; this latter woven of different strands and traditions; main feature, as a result of colonisation in 17th century large protestant minority which while Irish in most aspects of character and in their roots in soil of

Ulster, owe political allegiance to Britain, while overwhelming majority of Irish people wanted Irish independence in unity.

Partition: Has been an artificial attempt to resolve problems conditioned by British interests : has proved to be unsuccessful : lacks minimum consensus essential for a stable political entity; but is cemented on to the North now by the interests of the majority as seen by them, and by British statutory and constitutional guarantees. This is a cause of serious instability in one of America's nearest neighbours - and a part of the European Community - the situation has implications outside those of Irish question alone.

Government Policy: In accordance with its democratic mandate the Irish Government are working to achieve the aspiration of the great majority of the Irish people for unity, which if achieved, by consent, is the only possible way of attaining social and constitutional stability in Northern Ireland; The record of instability and violence in Northern Ireland underlines that policies based on division of the Irish people will not bring lasting peace.

Unity (Irish aspiration for): The united Ireland the Government aspires to is one which permits every Irishman, whatever his political or religious belief to take his rightful place, and make his full contribution. It can only be achieved by consent, not by coercion, still less by violence.

Violence (extent): Since 1969 there has been a death toll of almost 2,000 dead, 20,000 wounded and vast destruction of property in Northern Ireland. Of this death toll about nine tenths has been due to paramilitary violence. The I.R.A. have been responsible for 75% of these deaths. Of the 1,500 killed by the I.R.A., 1,100 were fellow Irishmen. The U.V.F. have been responsible for approximately 300 deaths. (N.I. Assembly figures about 200)

Violence (Cost): The violence has cost the State many hundreds of millions in extra security, compensation for injuries, depressed tourism etc. The annual cost to the British Exchequer of maintaining Northern Ireland is of the order of £1,000m. About 50p in the £1 of the Northern

Ireland gross domestic product comes from these subventions - many of which would be payable irrespective of whether violence continued in Northern Ireland.

Violence (lack of support for):

Those who engage in violence have no democratic mandate and are abhorred by the vast majority of the Irish people. At the last elections in which supporters of violence participated they gained just over 1% of the vote. They ignore the tradition of Irish nationalism, which is based on equal respect for the rights of all Irishmen, "Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter." They ignore the unanimous views of the four main Churches in Ireland "that there was no justification for the campaigns of bombing and killing". By deepening the mistrust between the two communities in Northern Ireland they represent the greatest single obstacle to the process of reconciliation which is an essential prerequisite of unity and stability.

Long Kesh (background): 370 prisoners in Long Kesh are taking part in this protest out of a total of 1,900 in the prison. 650 of the prisoners, convicted of offences committed before March 1976, have the special category status sought by the protesting prisoners. The protest involves refusal to wear prison clothes or to undertake prison work. The prison authorities have responded by imposing a strict regime (restrictions on visits, parcels). The prisoners in turn have been refusing to wash, clean out their cells or empty slop buckets.

Long Kesh (Our attitude): The Government would be opposed to any measure which would imply that acts of violence can be condoned in any way or that those who resort to violence in Northern Ireland could be entitled to any recognition as a legitimate part of the political process. While remaining firm on this principle the Government at the same time are concerned from a humanitarian point of view at the situation in Long Kesh. We avail of all channels open to us to keep ourselves informed of circumstances in the prison. The regular contacts at Ministerial and Official levels are availed of to ensure that the British Authorities are fully aware of our concern that the situation should be dealt with in a humane

and compassionate way and to convey the Government's views on specific aspects of the problem which arise from time to time.

Long Kesh (Manipulation): A major obstacle to any attempt to have conditions in the prison improved is the fact that apart from those motivated by humanitarian considerations many of those associated with the protest and in a position to influence the situation have shown themselves only too ready to exploit the condition of the prisoners and the the anguish of their families in a cynical pursuit of propaganda material. The Government have felt compelled to denounce the attempts of certain groups (whose own concern for human rights is more than suspect) to exploit the human suffering caused by the protest for propaganda purposes or ulterior political motives. The murder of the Assistant Prison Governor and of other prison officers makes the task of seeking a solution to the problem in this case almost an impossible one.

Government's work for unity: In spite of the obstacle caused by the campaign of violence the Irish Government continue to work at all levels for reconciliation and unity by consent (FF study group, cross-border co-operation, development of dynamic economy and of Irish role in Europe to make unity a more attractive proposition etc.).

Britain's Responsibility: Britain as the author of partition and the de facto administration in Northern Ireland has a major responsibility and a major interest in solving the problem. We would hope that after the election on 3 May the new British Government will take stock of its role in Northern Ireland and accept that their policies to date have failed.

British withdrawal: We do not call for an abrupt withdrawal of British forces since in view of the tensions between the communities built up over generations and acerbated by the present campaign, this could well precipitate even worse violence, for which the Northern majority would be the major

protaganists. Britain should not walk away from the problem but join with us in promoting the reconciliation of all the people of Ireland which is the only lasting solution.

British declaration needed: We believe the present deadlock could be broken and the unionist community encouraged on the path of reconciliation if Britain were to declare its interest in encouraging the unity of Ireland by agreement and in a harmonious relationship between the two islands.

Unity (Economic and other Arguments for): The economic social and security arguments for unity are becoming stronger with each year.

- (1) In 1965, GDP per head here was about three quarters of that of Northern Ireland - which was even then massively supported by British subsidies. In recent years the gap may well have disappeared though in the absence of firm figures a precise comparison is impossible;
- (2) the interests of this country and Northern Ireland are closer in the EEC, than those of Northern Ireland and the U.K. Together in Brussels, both parts of Ireland could make a better case for the entire island than either can under present arrangements.
- (3) Unity could remove the last real obstacle to the best relations with the U.K. which is our largest trading partner, and thus help to enhance political stability in this part of the world, and European security.

U.S. Influence: Those in the United States who want to see peace achieved in Northern Ireland and who are sympathetic to our approach can be of enormous help to us. The influence of the United States with the British Government is enormous and we would hope that, in so far as Ireland is concerned, that influence would always be used to support the policies of democratically elected politicians in Ireland, North and South and in favour of the process of reconciliation.

Noraid: Financial and other assistance from the United States has been an important factor in sustaining the

campaign of violence which has caused so much bloodshed and destruction. This aid has fluctuated upwards and downwards according to the type of event which dominates the media. Over the past eight years it has totalled over \$1.5m and amounted to \$160,000 last year. ** Even aid allegedly for families can go to make widows rather than help them. The Irish Government has repeatedly condemned Irish Northern Aid (NORAI) which raised funds for the IRA and the Irish National Caucus, many of whose officers have a record of support for violence and whose propaganda is very suspect. If the American people wish to support the Irish cause there are many excellent funds or charities through which aid can be channelled. These include the Ireland Fund, Ireland's Children, the Inter-Church Emergency Fund, the Northern Ireland Resurgence Trust Fund.

Appreciation of Speaker O'Neill's endeavours: We greatly appreciate the endeavours of Speaker O'Neill, and his colleague to bring home to Americans of Irish origin that any support for violence is a massive hindrance to the process of reconciliation.

Our hopes for success of visit: We hope that this visit will enable the delegation to establish at first hand that the path of reconciliation is the one supported by the vast majority of the Irish people, by the Irish Government and by the elected leaders of the minority in Northern Ireland. We hope that they will work to persuade their fellow Americans that this, rather than the violence created by a handful of self-appointed men, is the path to unity and peace and the only approach worthy of support.

** These figures may well be much less than the total amount of funds remitted in support of violence in one way or another. The possibility of large secret donations cannot be discounted. /Also the I.R.A., the ^{and} I.N.L.A., have been involved in substantial bank raids here.