

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

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ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

To: Mr W Kirwan, Assistant Secretary

From: F Murray

Northern Ireland Policy Review

In response to the Taoiseach's memorandum of 10th August I have prepared the attached comments on certain aspects of Northern Ireland policy. As suggested the views expressed are frank and uninhibited.

F. Murray

14 August 1981

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Northern Ireland Policy

Review

1. The Taoiseach's memorandum of 10th August 1981 states that we are now at a point where a fundamental review of Northern Ireland policy appears desirable. The remarks set out in this note have been prepared with that objective in mind and are as suggested frank and uninhibited. The views expressed, unless otherwise stated, are solely those of the undersigned.

Existing Policy: need to amplify

2. In reviewing Northern Ireland policy the first matter to be considered is, I suggest, how well defined Government policy is in this difficult and sensitive area. The Programme for Government 1981-1986 which is 50 pages long contains one page on Northern Ireland. This statement is of necessity very brief as was the Taoiseach's statement in the Dail on 30th June in replying to the debate on the nomination of members of the Government. Apart from these two items we have had three parliamentary questions on various aspects of the Government's Northern policy (on the proposed advisory council, the present state of anglo-Irish talks and policy in regard to seeking a declaration of intent from the British to withdraw from Ireland). These items, even when taken together, do not elaborate sufficiently on the principles of the Government's policy. There is a need, therefore, for a comprehensive speech on Northern Ireland policy along the lines of the Roscommon speech of 5th June. In making that recommendation I am conscious that the Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs has issued a number of statements this week on one aspect of Government policy to which I will refer again.
3. A comprehensive policy statement in this context would be of great assistance in replying to the numerous letters received from week to week particularly from abroad suggesting various solutions to the N.I. problem. It would also provide a useful bench mark for other members of the Government, Ministers of State and backbench T.D.'s, who may be required to speak on this subject. The timing of such a speech is, of course, of the utmost importance. It should not,

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in my view, be made until after the next meeting with the British Prime Minister and preferably after the H.Block/^{crises} has been resolved or at least defused. The possibility of a Dail debate sometime in the next session would also need to be considered.

4. One matter which might be clarified in such a speech is the "status" of the Fine Gael policy document 'Ireland - Our Future Together' published in February 1979. This document was not referred to in the Programme for Government. Is it now to be regarded as overtaken/^{by subsequent} events? If not what follow through action is required?

5. H.Block Situation

The Taoiseach in particular and indeed other members of the Government have been preoccupied with attempts to bring about a resolution of the H.Block hunger strike impasse since assuming office. Ten statements on the matter have now been/^{made or} issued by the Taoiseach and at least two by /the Acting Minister for Foreign Affairs apart from numerous and at times daily statements from the Government Press Secretary.

There have been about five meetings with relatives of the hunger strikers, the final one of which resulted in a well publicised "sit-in" in Government Buildings.

6. In the past 10 days we have been receiving a number of letters from persons who describe themselves as supporters of the Government expressing dissatisfaction with the way in which the H.Block issue has been handled to date. Some examples of this correspondence are annexed. The writers are dismayed and perplexed by what they perceive to be Government support for fellow travellers of the IRA. They fear that the overall tone of/^{the statement referred to} and in particular the Tanaiste's statement on Sunday last can only give encouragement to those who manipulate the hunger strike. They point out that, as they see it, the dispute is not a bona fide one about prison conditions but rather another phase

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in the IRA's struggle for supremacy. In all, 13 letters have been received in this vein. Most of the other correspondence on the H.Block issue (43 letters since Tuesday, 4th August) have urged the Government to do more to solve the H.Block crisis. Nobody has written in to say that the Government are doing well on this issue.

7. In a recent conversation with some friends of mine who are members of the Church of Ireland and who have lived for a few years in Belfast the following points came across:-

There is considerable unease amongst members of the minority community here because of all aspects of the H.Block situation; they feel threatened because of the protest marches, black flags, intimidation of various kinds.

Garret has done an about-face on this issue: he was always highly thought of by Northern Ireland Protestants but now? Instead of condemning these people as before he now appears to be supportive of them.

We voted for Fine Gael because of its traditional stand on law and order matters: we have been let down.

Garret seems to take the side of the hunger strikers rather than those who are being killed.

Our state of unease which to us is real, may possibly be unjustified but in the light of the way the matter has been handled what can we think?

Thank God for John Kelly - at long last somebody in Government is getting the whole thing in perspective.

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8. Needless to remark I went to considerable trouble to explain to these people why the Taoiseach and the Government were devoting so much time to efforts to find a solution to the H.Block crisis; that what they had done or said should not in any way be interpreted as supportive of the Provisional IRA or their fellow travellers but that on the contrary the Government's approach had been designed to defeat the aim of those seeking to exploit it for propaganda purposes. I also explained that the Government were anxious to do anything they could to remove this sore from the body politic and in that way deprive the perpetrators of violence, intimidation, etc. of a "cause" to ferment agitation.
9. The most significant part of this conversation was the statement expressed more than once that the fears, and sense of alienation expressed were prevalent among members of the minority community generally. The editorial in the recent issue of the Church of Ireland Gazette, a copy of which I attach, articulates in its own way the feelings of polarisation already described.
10. My personal view on the Government handling of the H.Block crisis since assuming office is somewhat critical. So far as public presentation is concerned the way in which the problem has been handled has lacked balance. The Government have been seen as acting somewhat out of character in taking a hard line, in public, against the British on this issue. The question must be asked whether the issue is one of prison conditions or not. There have been various controversies since the beginning of the year about the matter of political status. The five demands have been interpreted by the British as in essence political status and they have repeatedly stated that while they are prepared to be flexible and humane in applying the present regime they will not recreate the "special category" regime or anything approaching it.
11. While recognising, in full, that responsibility for the situation at the Maze rests with the British who created the problem in the first instance by firstly introducing and later withdrawing special category

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status the question must be asked whether in our various representations to the British urging changes in their prison code we could be requesting "improvements" or alterations which we would not be prepared to implement ourselves if the boot were on the other foot. Or to put it in another way how would we react to proposals from the British about the continued use of B basement at Mountjoy to house the Littlejohn Brothers and two or three ex-UDA prisoners. (B basement as you will be aware is considered as unsuitable accommodation both by the prison medical officer and the prison visiting committee for long term prisoners).

12. In my view we should not be in the business of making detailed suggestions to the British/as to how to run their prison service, particularly in public statements. It is for them to bring forward a solution to the current impasse. For our part, of course, we must continue to urge the British to revise their strategy so that a solution can be found which will avoid further loss of life either inside or outside the prison.

13. If, to date, we have not succeeded in our efforts to convince the British of the de-stabilising effect which the hunger strike situation is having on political life here then perhaps we should go back to the drawing board and renew our lobbying but do so in a non-public way. Perhaps a further meeting at ministerial level might be considered. If, as we are led to believe by many sources, the persons who is calling the shots in this matter is Mrs Thatcher herself why not give some thought to a meeting between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister on this and other matters. A meeting at Heads of Government level would give the Taoiseach an opportunity to convey at first hand to the British all of the implications for us here of the continued failure to find a resolution to this problem. As long as the hunger strike situation continues to polarise relations within the community in Northern Ireland and between the majority in the North and the South

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matters such as the Joint Studies will tend to remain academic. While we would naturally wish to have a much better climate for a Heads of Government meeting than what prevails at present we cannot at the same time ignore the realities of the present situation and should not, in my view, be hesitant about tackling at Head of Government level if necessary the problems on the ground in anglo-Irish relations at present. In the end we may have to even accept that there is no early solution to the prison protest. If that is the case we should not allow the H-Block faction to dictate the pace of development of Anglo-Irish relations.

14. Joint Studies

A commitment has already been given to continue the Joint Studies process. There is an undertaking in the Programme for Governmental 1981-1986 to "eliminate the distrust that has been created by unwise and unnecessary secrecy surrounding these discussions".

15. The case for pressing ahead with the Joint Studies is, I suggest, compelling. To change course now in any major respect would appear to be ill-advised. The Joint Studies process provided a valuable focus for a review of all aspects of anglo-Irish relations. They also have the advantage of concentrating minds at senior Governmental and Civil Service level in the U.K. on a broad range of political, economic and security issues in the sphere of anglo-Irish relations.
- A comprehensive review on these lines must, if it is to be of value, be carried out on a strictly confidential basis. It would be unrealistic to expect a team of consultants examining the problems of a major co-operation to do all their thinking out loud. For the same reason the Anglo-Irish talks had to be carried out on a strictly confidential basis just like as any other top level Civil Service work. It was, of course, always envisaged that as soon as the Study Groups reported at Head of Government level some or all of the conclusions reached would be made public. There is hardly any sound basis at this stage for departing from that strategy particularly when the process is almost at final report stage.

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16. Anglo-Irish Economic Steering Group

This group and its various subsidiary groups (all at Civil Service level) which were established pursuant to the agreement between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister in September 1977 have not been functioning for over a year now with one exception i.e. the Transport group which continues to meet on a half-yearly basis. Because of the build up to the meeting between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister of December 1980 and the initiation of the Joint Studies programme agreed at that meeting the work of the other groups has by and large been put in abeyance. There would have been certain practical difficulties in carrying on the work of the Anglo-Irish economic steering group at the same time as the Working Group on economic co-operation under the aegis of the Joint Studies. It is a matter of some regret, however, that the North/South sub-group of the Anglo-Irish economic steering group has not come together for long over a year. The North/South group provided a very useful focal point for a wide range of contacts at Civil Service level between officials in the Belfast Departments and their counterparts here in Dublin. Such contact can only be beneficial.

17. Whatever new anglo-Irish institutional structure is finally agreed upon I would suggest that in the absence of any devolved assembly in Northern Ireland consideration be given to the idea of having a North/South sub-group at ministerial level. This group could consist of members of the Government here and/or Ministers of State together with the Northern Ireland Secretary of State and his team of Junior Minister who have responsibility for the administration of the Belfast Departments. Provision could also be made for a senior official committee of Ministers deputies to meet again on a North/South basis to prepare the work of the Ministerial group which could perhaps meet on at least a twice-yearly basis.

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18. A Federal Solution

In the context of the current review exercise I wish to draw attention again to the paper on Federation and Confederation delivered by Professor Maurice Vile of the University of Kent at the Conference on Models of Political Co-operation held in Queen's University, Belfast, at the end of March last. A synopsis of Professor Vile's paper is attached together with an extract from my report on that conference relevant to this paper.

19. I recall that Professor Vile in his opening remarks expressed criticism of the North/South federation or confederation proposal as set out in the Fine Gael document 'Ireland - Our Future Together', February 1979. As he saw it there was confusion in that document between the idea of federation or confederation as he would define both concepts. He did not favour the idea of a federal system because in his view such a system could not paper over deep divisiveness in society. He was strongly of the view that a two unit federation system could not work. In concluding his paper he suggested that the British Government should introduce devolution in Northern Ireland and in other parts of the UK. They should also introduce a system of power sharing together with a clearly defined civil rights code.

20. Professor Bernard Crick in his contribution to that conference did not agree with Professor Vile's contention that a federation of two parts would not work. Professor Crick both in his paper and in private contacts with him at the conference stressed the need for institutional structures between the Republic and the UK. He was strongly of the view that the real British interests lay in getting closer relations with the Republic as distinct from the problem of Northern Ireland. In his view Northern Ireland was sui generis and

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looking ahead two generations foresaw political scientists in the year 2020 setting an examination question on the following lines:

"Analyse with regard to developments in Irish/^{British} ^{now} relations over the past 100 years whether Northern Ireland is constitutionally more a part of the Republic of Ireland than the United Kingdom".

21. Clearly the more we can do to move in that direction and indeed further along the road towards fulfilling the national aspiration, within whatever time span, the better.

Northern Ireland: The future

22. Government policy will continue to have long term and short term aims. The long term solution will/^{continue to} be an agreed Ireland worked out on the basis of discussion and negotiation between North and South and Ireland and Britain. Such a solution can only come about by consent and agreement. In the short term the immediate priority must be to get both parts of the Community there living and working together so that there may be an end to violence and destruction. There is a great need to build on and enhance existing North/South contacts in all spheres and to do everything possible to counteract the many myths and misunderstandings that divide the Communities in the North and in turn North and South. There have been repeated calls from many quarters including the SDLP at its Annual Conference last year that the South should spell out the kind of United Ireland it envisages. Cannon Elliott of the Church of Ireland makes the same point repeatedly. Successive Governments here have never responded adequately to that particular request for among other reasons tactical considerations. Perhaps this aspect of Northern Ireland policy is worthy of review at this time. Another of the short term aims of Government policy must be to continue to develop closer co-operation between the peoples of these Islands as envisaged in the agreed Communiqués issued after last year's meetings with the British Prime Minister. The strategy involved in that agreement was that the two sovereign Governments should develop and build on the unique relationship

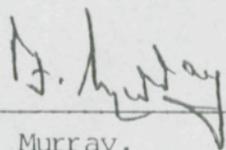
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between our peoples so that a wholly new framework is set within which the problem of Northern Ireland may be resolved peacefully by agreement and in co-operation.

23. While acknowledging the necessity to bring Northern Ireland representatives into the process, at the earliest practicable opportunity, this approach will continue to offer the best hope of peace and reconciliation in Ireland and long term stability in these islands.



F. Murray,
14th August, 1981.