

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## IRELAND



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SECRET

The New Ireland Forum - Strategy and Tactics

1. The stakes involved could be very high. Should the NIF collapse or fail to produce a credible and workable consensus assessment, the position of the SDLP would be seriously, perhaps even terminally weakened and a new impetus given to violence and support for violence. Equally the Government's own position vis-à-vis both sections of the community in Northern Ireland, vis-à-vis the Government and Opposition in London and possibly even domestically would suffer. In such circumstances even the appearance of "bipartisanship" in Dublin could be shattered. Conversely, success - a realistic and agreed assessment - could provide an unprecedentedly solid basis for a breakthrough both with the British and with the Unionists, revitalise the SDLP and damage the credibility of both Sinn Féin and the PIRA in the eyes of the minority. This rather drastic assessment is widely shared among constitutional nationalists in Northern Ireland, notably John Hume.

2. Publicly the NIF starts with the major disadvantage that it is widely either misunderstood or resented: Unionist public opinion views it as a sop to the SDLP or worse (correspondingly the Government's own involvement is seen as damaging its relative credibility in Unionist eyes), our domestic media and public opinion by and large do not understand either its nature or its potential, the British Government is either skeptical or misinformed (viewing the enterprise as no more than a rescue operation for the SDLP - although Mr Prior and a few officials appreciate albeit dimly its possible benefits) and the British media and public opinion are simply not interested. There is a major job to be done in public education in all these domains.

3. There is the added but overwhelming complication that the possibility of success of the NIF will hang on the results of the Westminster election both in Northern Ireland and overall. Should the SDLP suffer a major setback the NIF would become largely

irrelevant: the Irish Government would face an entirely new and fundamental crisis and the NIF process (whose success would largely depend on the central role of the SDLP as between the other parties) could not be credibly mobilised. Equally a result which would produce a Thatcher administration dependent either on a pact (Tory minority or miniscule majority, say 0-10, in Parliament) or an understanding (Tory majority of say 10-25) with the OUP and DUP would greatly harden both Unionist intransigence and Tory Unionism for the foreseeable future, to a point where the NIF would be cast in a highly defensive role. It must be said that a massive Tory majority (120 upwards) might also (although this is a good deal less certain) produce dangerously fundamentalist policies in London which might create a similar difficulty for the NIF.

4. Eventual success could perhaps be defined in terms of the degree to which the work of the NIF facilitates medium-term and longer-term political progress. This implies two further criteria:

- that the results of the NIF either ideally converge with or at least are not incompatible with what we privately believe may become available if Prior is re-appointed;
- that the results help to reduce Unionist fear and hostility to a point where an unboycottable power-sharing arrangement is no longer inconceivable.

5. What type of report would meet these criteria? The internal process of the NIF will presumably consist of analysis (of evidence presented and other data), assessment and proposal(s). It is suggested that the published report should contain at least the assessment and the proposal(s)/blueprint(s). It is also suggested that, for the purpose of meeting the two criteria outlined above (para. 4), the assessment could be more important than the blueprint(s). For that purpose the assessment should be (i) agreed between the parties and (ii) constitute a comprehensive and realistic

acknowledgement and appreciation of all the major difficulties in the way of Irish unity. Such an agreed assessment would be unprecedented, it would contribute greatly to fostering an atmosphere of confidence in Anglo-Irish relations and it would also directly confound and undermine the ground of Unionist paranoia.

It would naturally be assumed that the eventual blueprint(s) would be consistent with the assessment i.e. adequately take account of all the identified difficulties. This would not necessarily require that there be only one blueprint, a circumstance that might be politically more acceptable.

6. Two factors in particular will be of central importance in ensuring such a desirable assessment:

- (i) a challenging input from Unionists who ideally should raise all the fundamental questions;
- (ii) the public and private positions already taken by Hume in insisting that the NIF (or pace his last Party Conference speech, the Council for a New Ireland) tackle the following "painfully difficult" questions:
  - How do we accommodate in a new definition of Irishness the fact of one million people who also identify themselves as British?
  - How do we accommodate a necessary British dimension in a New Ireland (sovereignty, security)?
  - What is the economic cost of a New Ireland and are we ready to pay it?
  - Is the South in particular ready to face the extremely difficult Church/State problems which have to be overcome before a New Ireland can be envisaged?

It should be added that the soundings taken by DFA with all SDLP participants in the Forum suggest that almost without exception they share the essence of Hume's approach.

(Note: It might be that the current Referendum process, with all its unfortunate implications for Dublin policy vis-a-vis Northern Ireland, might paradoxically at least point up the reality of the "painful difficulty" inherent in securing not just "Northern consent" but even "Southern consent".)

#### Some Tactical Considerations

7. The dynamics of the interaction between the participants are a matter for the political judgement of those concerned. Two general observations suggest themselves:

- The fact that the success or failure of the NIF is of absolutely vital concern to the survival of the SDLP should be a factor in ensuring a generally supportive attitude of all participants;
- The fact that the actual process of the NIF in effect admits the Opposition and the SDLP to part of the process of policy-making during a period when the Government's own prerogative in this area is partially in suspense should on the face of it encourage both "outsider" parties to make a success of the enterprise.

8. It can be assumed that the principal concern of the Chairman will be to find common ground among the parties. He will be less concerned with the nature of that common ground. It follows that it should be the Government's concern both to ensure that the substance of NIF positions is acceptable and to ensure tactically that such positions emerge by agreement. This will demand considerable delicacy and generosity vis-à-vis the other participants.

Assuming that the analysis in paragraph 7 is correct, it might be profitable that the Government representatives permit themselves as it were to be constantly jointly challenged within the NIF by the SDLP on a "North-challenges-the-South" basis. This would ensure

that the basic agenda of the NIF (the fundamental questions) would be addressed on a bipartisan rather than competitive basis and should help to elicit an acceptable assessment.

#### Procedural Questions

9. Following the public opening session on May 30th the participants will have to consider procedural and practical arrangements: these could have an important impact on the final outcome of the NIF. The agenda for this private session will be considered by the party leaders at a lunch meeting on May 30th. Following is, broadly speaking, what is at present envisaged:

- (a) quorum for meetings?
- (b) question of one main committee or several dealing with different aspects?
- (c) submissions to the Forum - how should they be obtained and should oral evidence be taken in public or private?
- (d) frequency of meetings?
- (e) should the Forum close operations for a specific period in the summer to allow participants to take holidays?
- (f) dealings with the media?
- (g) should the various parties as well as the secretariat be invited to submit papers on different topics?

10. A reasonable number for a quorum might be a third of the membership of the Forum (i.e. nine).

11. There is a persuasive argument in favour of having only a committee of the whole so that the more contentious issues are dealt with by the party leaders who may be the best placed to modify entrenched positions. This could of course have the effect of slowing down the work of the Forum. This would not exclude the establishment of specific working groups to examine particular issues as they arise within a brief stipulated period.

12. It seems desirable that submissions to the Forum should be sought at the earliest date possible perhaps initially by a decision of the NIF on 30 May followed by media advertisements including the Northern papers. The Department of Foreign Affairs can discretely supplement these efforts through contact with people in Northern Ireland (it has indeed already begun this work). It would be important to hold sessions in public so as to attract submissions from Northern Ireland and from the majority community in particular. This would enable the people concerned to protect themselves from likely criticism from Unionist politicians and hopefully encourage other more reluctant groups to come and make submissions. The evidential process of the NIF will gather pace only as the NIF gradually establishes its credibility: it follows that it is highly important that there be no cut-off date for such submissions.

13. In relation to the frequency of meetings there is likely to be a fairly intensive phase from mid-June to July in order to hear some preliminary submissions, to commission papers and to have some introductory exchanges within the NIF. It would seem appropriate to have a summer holiday break during August and resume intensive deliberations during September and early October before the Dáil resumes. Final drafting and attempts to reach a consensus on a report could be attempted in November.

14. It is essential that the seriousness and nature of the NIF be communicated as effectively and as quickly as possible to the media North and South and in Britain. This is the responsibility principally of the NIF Press Secretary, Ted Smyth, who is experienced in this field. The internal exchanges of the NIF will necessarily take place in private while the taking of evidence and all submissions from outsiders should be public matters. A case can be made for requiring that papers produced by the NIF Secretariat for confidential discussion within the NIF (e.g. papers on the Unionist position, the continuity of policy in Dublin vis-à-vis Northern Ireland, economic factors) should themselves be published with a view to stimulating or even provoking intervention on the part of outsiders; such a requirement could be justified on the grounds that it would help to maintain the independence of the Secretariat. The parties in the NIF may themselves wish to submit papers on various topics: it would seem that they should also be published.

Thus the main focus of growing public awareness (the process of public education referred to earlier) would be the developing body of evidence or other data presented in submissions.