

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## IRELAND



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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

*Confidential*

21st February 1984

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9/23

Discussion with Cardinal Hume

Dear Assistant Secretary

I paid a courtesy call today on Cardinal Hume, Archbishop of Westminster. In our discussion I found that he was concerned about Northern Ireland and reasonably well informed about the Forum. He was however gloomy about the possibility that there would be a serious British response to the Forum Report when it appears; and he was pessimistic too about the prospects for any kind of settlement of the Northern Ireland problem.

The Cardinal began by asking me for any figures we had in the Embassy about the number of Irish in the Westminster Archdiocese. This led into a discussion of the Irish in Britain. He was interested in my account of the new activism of some elements in the Irish community, in the course of which I touched on the relatively moderate approach of the Federation of Irish Societies and the more activist approach of the IBRG. For his part he spoke very favourably of the Irish Chaplaincy Scheme under Fr Bobby Gilmore; and he said that he will be going to Dublin soon to plead (with the Irish Hierarchy) that it be maintained.

He spoke also of the importance of the Irish role in Catholicism in Britain. I wondered about possible tension at times between the Irish and older English elements in Catholicism here but he discounted this saying that, from his experience, the Catholic community was substantially Irish - or else Italian or Portuguese. The purely English element in his view was very small.

The Cardinal spoke with some concern about a certain backlash effect here following IRA bomb attacks. He said that this was felt not just by the Irish but by Catholics as such, and at such times they found it necessary to keep a relatively low profile. He recalled that at the time of the hunger strikes he had felt under considerable pressure, not to say criticism, about such issues as the morality of suicide and he had felt it necessary to speak out in these circumstances. He said reflectively, that he sometimes felt he should speak out more on the Northern Ireland issue but he did not feel well informed enough about Irish history to do so. He commented that for him the best summary was still that of Cardinal Newman who said that the English never remember and the Irish never forget.

I said in reply that my own experience here is limited so far but that after the Harrods bomb in December there was surprisingly little resentment directed at the Embassy; and no evidence of resentment on the part of the injured whom I visited in hospital. I thought that this was due in part to publicity about the death of two of our security forces in Ballinamore in the days before the Harrods bomb. This had brought out the point that people in the South as well as in Northern Ireland and in Britain had all suffered the effects of terrorism. Our hope is for a wider understanding in Britain that the Northern Ireland problem is not just some inexplicable quarrel among the Irish but a legacy of history to both islands which both must find a way to address together - politically and not just from a security viewpoint.

We talked a bit about the Forum Report and I filled him in on recent press reports and on our hopes and expectations. The Cardinal was gloomy about the prospect of an adequate British Government response to the Forum Report when it appears. He said frankly that the problem is that no British Government has been, or will be, ready to face down the Unionists. He referred to Sunningdale and to the weakness shown by the British Government in May 1974 in face of the strike. He went on "could you imagine if it had been the Falklands - the resolution which would have been shown". He said there was no doubt if what is happening in Northern Ireland had been happening in Devon for example, the problem would have been addressed long ago. Looking ahead, he was very pessimistic and saw no prospect of a settlement.

In reply I said we were not quite so pessimistic - we could not afford to be so. I touched on the alienation in Northern Ireland since the hunger strike, the growth of Sinn Fein, and the difficulty facing the SDLP in the period up to the May 1985 local elections. I said that we had some hope at least that a response would be forthcoming from Mr Prior and the British Government to the Forum Report when it appears. As to the weakness shown by the Wilson Government in May 1974 in not upholding Sunningdale, I thought Ted Heath would agree with him in blaming this for the final failure of Sunningdale. (He had said as much quite strongly recently in conversation at a lunch in the Embassy).

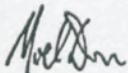
The Cardinal said he thought that Mr Whitelaw had probably been the best Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I said that many Irish people would agree and added that Mr Prior, the present incumbent, is also well enough regarded in Ireland.

The Cardinal himself thinks that the eventual solution must be a united Ireland; and he said he doubted if there

could be anyone except the Unionists who does not somehow see that point. In reply I said that that is indeed a widely held aspiration but that many in the South now see the immediate problem as more complex and are conscious of our own past contribution to divisions in Ireland and of the need to win the consent of Unionists.

In general it is clear that the Cardinal is concerned and reasonably well informed but that he also feels - perhaps because his own immediate background is not Irish - that he is lacking in an intuitive grasp of the complexities of the problem and is thus rather cautious in what he says in public about it. He is concerned about the effects on Catholics as such, in this country, of the continuing problem; and he is pessimistic about the prospects for any resolution of the conflict. I should add however that I felt that his pessimism, both about the problem itself and about the possibility of British Government action in response to the Forum, was of a rather general nature. It may be valid but it did not strike me as a judgement based on any very close, considered view of political attitudes here.

Yours sincerely



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