

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2015/89/35
Creation Date(s):	15 January 1985
Extent and medium:	4 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

Secret

Uimhir.....

To:

From:

Airlie House Conference on Northern Ireland, held in
Warrenton, Virginia, USA, from 6 to 9 January, 1985

The Conference was organised by the Committee for an Irish Forum. Mr Padraig O'Malley is a prominent member of this Committee and was the principal organiser of the Conference and chaired all the sessions. The main participants are as listed in the attached. I will prepare a fuller note of the Conference which was broken up into eight separate sessions over the three days and the Conference organisers will be producing a transcript of the proceedings. I thought it would be useful, initially, to set down my own impressions of the Conference and some of the more important points which emerged.

1 The OUP and DUP delegations came very well prepared and conveyed a clear impression of reasonableness and willingness to talk to the SDLP. This was particularly noticeable in the case of Peter Robinson, the DUP's Deputy Leader who pointed out how difficult it was for them to be there in the first place. They would not get any cheers in Sandy Row for doing so but they were prepared to give leadership to the people they represented. He spoke of the need for compromise from both sides and said that the time was now opportune but that these circumstances may not come again. He made a number of direct pleas to the SDLP to come to the conference table for talks without preconditions. The Republic was entitled to its interest and concern on behalf of the minority community and the British Government could give effect to this. The SDLP should sit down and talk before it was too late.

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

To:

- 2 -

From:

These sentiments were echoed, albeit in a less forceful way, by the OUP representatives. Peter Smith, QC, Honorary Secretary of the OUP, while plugging his critique of the Forum Report "Opportunity Lost", said that the fact that the Forum had happened at all was a good thing although too high a price had been paid for Mr Haughey's endorsement of it. Their "Way Forward" document was not a proposal for local government in Northern Ireland but rather for a regional devolved government for the area. The document's recognition of the Irish identity and the proposal for a Bill of Rights were not cosmetics. When they got to the negotiating table they would look at other proposals. Smith invited the SDLP to come to the table with their shopping list. He also spoke of their acceptance of the position that the Republic could make representations on behalf of the minority community and that some structure to accommodate this, as part of a package, could be worked out. Both he and the DUP delegation emphasised the sense of urgency which they felt in the situation.

While some speakers were less than impressed by the apparent openness of the unionist delegations, referring to their gestures as "Airlie House" unionism, tailored for US audiences, my judgement and that of other participants was that this was indeed a genuine attempt by these parties and by Peter Robinson in particular to break the log-jam in Northern Ireland and to open the door to talks without preconditions. The contributions seemed to me to be quite sincere - addressing Austin Currie at one stage Robinson reminded them both that they had young families whose futures were in their hands.

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

To:

- 3 -

From:

2 The question as to whether the British Government had fully responded to the Forum Report was raised. The Conference was left with the clear impression by Christopher Patten, Parliamentary Under Secretary for Northern Ireland, and other Conservative Party speakers that Prior's Commons statement of 2 July last was their formal response. Peter Needham MP suggested that it may not be wise for the British to say any more about the Forum Report at this stage although he appreciated that the Forum parties might feel there was a lack of detailed response to it.

3 Christopher Patten spoke of the need for the British Government to act in its capacity as the sovereign power if no progress were made. He was not very specific as to what action the British would take. But at one stage he seemed to be speaking in the context of action on issues such as Flags and Emblems legislation, etc.
discussion

4 Following some/at various stages during the Conference of the priority afforded to the problem by the British Government, a clear consensus emerged that Northern Ireland ranked low on the British political agenda. Patten said that the British were pessimistic about a solution so the problem therefore got a low priority. For many people, direct rule was the lowest common denominator.

5 During the discussion on security, Senator Mary Robinson made the suggestion that the developments here in relation to extradition suggested/look at the question of Ireland ratifying the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism. Jim Allister in the course of a very hard hitting speech said that the Republic had

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

To:

- 4 -

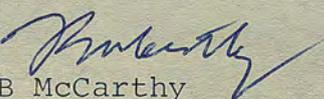
From:

yet to extradite for the killing of policemen/UDR men in Northern Ireland. He said that we still maintained an "open house" for IRA terrorists.

6 Harold McCusker made some play of the view that the Joint Communique issued after the Chequers Summit, with its references to the Taoiseach's acceptance of the constitutional position of Northern Ireland, was the context in which any talks would have to take place. By her re-affirmation that Northern Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, the Prime Minister had also laid down the context. He said that the Communique, with these references, flew in the face of the Forum Report and he attempted to elicit John Hume's agreement to the Communique's references. John Hume was non-committal in his response.

7 One was struck by the youthfulness of the DUP delegation in particular - Robinson, Allister and Wilson are all in their early/mid thirties. This younger generation is moving into the forefront of politics in Northern Ireland but it seems that the structures in the other parties and particularly the SDLP has not yet brought forward a younger generation from the nationalist community.

8 During an informal discussion with Austin Currie after the Conference, he ventured the suggestion that if the SDLP did participate in talks, or "talks about talks", with the other parties in Northern Ireland, the Anglo-Irish process might be the vehicle for delivering, in tandem, an acceptable Irish dimension: He stressed that the idea was just forming in his mind and that he had not thought it through or discussed it with his colleagues.


B McCarthy

15 January 1985

✓ CC M Burke DFA