



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code:	2016/22/2068
Creation Dates:	18 April 1986
Extent and medium:	10 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Accession Conditions:	Open
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ROINN AN TAOISIGH

Uimhir.....

SECRETNorthern IrelandMeeting with Lord Mayor Carson

The Taoiseach met the Lord Mayor of Belfast, who is accompanied by Mr Alfie Redpath in his office today. The meeting lasted approximately an hour and a half. After some preliminary comment about the condition of local government in Belfast the Lord Mayor went on to go in detail into the purpose for which he had sought the meeting. This note is in the form of direct speech but does not purport to be a verbatim account.

Mayor Carson:

There are many sinister influences behind the violence in the North at present. This one side of the story. On the other, I can travel throughout Belfast - in both communities - with impunity.

Redpath:

Do not underestimate what may be ahead. We could run into a bloodbath. There are close links between some politicians and the paramilitaries. The thuggery in the North is being manipulated with a purpose. Paisley and Robinson seem to be working with a scenario of UDI in mind. They will say, when the violence has reached a certain point, that the only way out is for Ulster to look after itself.

Both the Lord Mayor and I accept the Anglo-Irish Agreement and see that there is no way out of it in Ulster but acceptance. The perception of the Agreement there is that it has brought about a change of status for the nationalists. They are seen as having been given joint nationality. On the other hand Unionists are seeing themselves as having been dis-enfranchised. They are also deeply resentful at having been left out. They have borne 16 years of violence and now this happens without their being consulted.

Taoiseach:

The whole question is most difficult. The Unionists purport to set out to support the union. What they are doing is the opposite. Part of the effort of the Agreement was to stabilise the union - until such time, if ever, as there was majority consent for change. Yet the Unionists appear not to have taken this on board.

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As to consultation - there were widespread leaks, from the British, on the Agreement, before it was signed. They were offered consultation and refused it. The aim of the Agreement is to stabilise things. There is no question of either Government repudiating the Agreement.

Redpath:

Is there any way in which a signal can be given that moves at local level between Unionists and the SDLP would be welcomed? Could the atmosphere for that type of development be provided by some means, from Dublin?

Taoiseach:

We are very anxious to stabilise the situation - without affecting the Agreement. We would very much like to see the parties in Northern Ireland get together. The Agreement says that. This is not an empty formula. John Hume has said again and again that he is willing to enter into talks without pre-conditions. We fully support all that he is saying in this respect.

Redpath:

What we need is an indication that nothing would be done to hinder progress.

Taoiseach:

The possibility or the reality of dialogue between London and the Unionists may upset things. If Paisley and Molyneaux are engaged in talks with the Prime Minister, they may be wasting good time in London which should be spent on local talks. The talks in Northern Ireland on devolution are important.

Carson:

We recognise the difficulties being caused by what Paisley is saying. He said yesterday on Downtown Radio that nothing could happen until the Anglo-Irish Agreement is out of the way.

Taoiseach:

I did not hear that interview. My understanding was that his position was a great deal more ambiguous than that.

Redpath:

Molyneaux is also more ambiguous. He is acting through Frank Millar. They have done a great deal of work. They have many proposals down on paper - with which Molyneaux is not directly associating himself.

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Taoiseach:

It is most unfortunate the way the recent draft Charter was developed and released. The effect on the SDLP leadership was particularly unfortunate.

Redpath:

The trouble is that Hume was not kept informed.

Taoiseach:

Frank Millar has been most helpful. The language he is using is extremely helpful.

Carson:

The SDLP have not responded very well to the whole situation.

Taoiseach:

That is not fair. John Hume has acted very well throughout.

Carson:

He is not good on the question of support for the security forces.

Taoiseach:

I cannot agree with you there. He has gone to great trouble both in Northern Ireland and in Westminster to say that he supports the impartial operation of the police forces. He has said that he and his Party are willing to enter into talks on devolution, without pre-conditions. He has emphasised both thoughts, within the last fortnight. There are some people in the SDLP who are not quite so forthcoming but they are not as important or as significant as John Hume who has the support of the vast majority in his Party. The Unionist leadership seems to lack coherence. Who is John Hume to deal with - is it Molyneaux or is it someone else? Doubts have been expressed as to the ability of Paisley and Molyneaux to deliver whatever may be discussed. We had thought here that the groundswell after the earlier violence might well be moving in the direction of moderation. Would McCusker, Taylor, Smith and others support their leaders if they went into talks? This is an inhibiting factor on the whole question.

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Carson:

McCusker is likely to be obstructive.

Redpath:

Others are going for total integration. This is a mad idea but they are going for it.

Taoiseach:

That is a chimera.

Redpath:

None the less McCusker is looking for total integration. He thinks that this will guarantee absence of change. He has forgotten that Ireland in 1800 was totally integrated with the United Kingdom. That fact did not provide against change.

Taoiseach:

What does integration mean? Do those who push it know what it means? Is it the abolition of the Northern Ireland civil service?

Carson:

Yes. It also means, in their eyes, that there would be no Stormont and that Northern Ireland would be governed in exactly the same way as any other part of the United Kingdom.

Taoiseach:

Yes but those two things are not quite the same. There are local Scottish offices and Welsh offices etc.

Redpath:

On the question of support for devolution talks, Molyneaux would have Frank Millar with him, he also would have Ferguson (Enniskillen) and probably Rev. Martin Smith, as well as Peter Smith plus one other whose name I cannot remember at present. Obviously Ardill, West, and McNarry would be supportive. They strongly believe the way forward is through talks rather than by violence.

I have been asked to put a question to you by this group. If you do not mind I will do so. The question is - in the event of agreement on talks, with or without British and Irish Government participation, what role would the Anglo-Irish Conference play during the talks?

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Taoiseach:

What lies behind that question? As you know the Conference meets at Ministerial level depending on the amount of work coming into it from other levels. There is work on the police side and on the cooperation side. The police work is developing very well. So far as I know it is going ahead in four areas. As soon as the work has reached a certain point the Conference meets. The meetings have been at regular intervals. It has met four times. Twice in December, once in February, and once in March. There have been variable intervals between the meetings - of up to two months on occasion. This could be a period within which a meeting could take place

Redpath:

Gow is floating the idea that the requirement that the Conference meet regularly could be once a week or once a month or once a year. He has been briefed by the McNarry group. They are floating the idea that without setting the Agreement aside there might be a period within which it would not meet. Some sort of a gesture like this could get devolution talks moving. Both Paisley and Molyneux understand that if talks start, they will be responsible for the final solution and that that final solution must be something better than the Agreement. A lot of work has gone into the charter of which I think a copy was sent to you in March. Would it be possible for the McNarry group to come to see you on a private visit?

Taoiseach:

I have some qualms about that sort of a meeting. In this world there is no such thing as a private visit. The effect on the SDLP the last time of this sort of thing was most unfortunate. I would have some considerable hesitation on the question of a meeting like this, particularly as it might affect John Hume.

I read the draft charter some time ago but I would need to be refreshed on its contents. I have the idea that the proposals for devolution in it have merit and were well worthy of consideration. There were, however, one or two things which struck me at the time.

The first was that the paper appears to contemplate full responsibility for law and order going to the devolved executive. The army, under this arrangement would act in support of the police. I do not know if you understand quite how difficult this would be, especially for the British Government. They are very deeply committed not to permitting their army, ever again, to get under the control

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or direction of a local administration. The army is the last guarantor of the State's security - this is the sort of thing which any sovereign Government would find it very difficult, if not impossible, to devolve.

I would like to make the point that on devolution, the Anglo-Irish Agreement is quite clear. In theory there is nothing which could not be devolved but the practicalities impose certain restraints.

In the whole negotiation there is a certain imbalance. We have been accepted, and can, to a degree, represent the Nationalist community in Northern Ireland. That is fairly widely accepted. The same cannot be said of the British, in so far as the Unionist community is concerned.

Then, on the last paragraph of the draft, there are references to the Anglo-Irish Agreement being superseded. I am not in a position to say anything supersedes the Anglo-Irish Agreement. I am not at all clear as to the meaning of all this.

Redpath:

The charter proposes a structure involving London, Dublin and Belfast. It envisages regular meetings involving all three at times or two out of the three at other times, depending on the subject. Paragraph two of the part of the document dealing with the framework is very significant.

Taoiseach:

Part of what is in that paragraph is contemplated or is in the Agreement. The document is very close to what is there. It is a very constructive document. The idea of PR for the executive also seems attractive - at least it is as good a way as any of getting the executive into existence.

The basic question on how to get the Parties to talk together. The Conference meets at slightly irregular intervals. It can meet in two weeks or two months. That sort of pattern offers a certain flexibility.

Carson made a reference to the Agreement's being suspended while the talks on devolution were going on. Perhaps the meetings could be deferred until Paisley and Molyneux have completed their discussions on devolution.

Taoiseach:

That is a recipe for ensuring that nothing would happen!

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Carson:

No. Two months would be enough. They are really sincere this time.

Taoiseach:

You know what would happen. There would be foot dragging. There would be no more meetings of the Conference because we would be told that the devolution talks were just about to succeed!

Carson:

- If you don't do something soon the consequences will be very serious.

Taoiseach:

I am very anxious that the Parties get together but what is happening now is that they seem to be looking to talks in London.

Carson:

I have even offered the City Hall as a neutral venue for meetings.

Taoiseach:

Before talks began we would need to be certain that the leaders could deliver and also that we knew where the talks were going to end up. There would also have to be full support for the arrangements from both the British and Irish Governments.

Redpath:

This document (the draft charter) is getting a lot of support at many levels in Northern Ireland. Paisley always draws back from anything of this sort - but that does not necessarily mean he does not support it.

Taoiseach:

What sort of support has Paisley got? Is Robinson firmly behind him or would he take over?

Caron:

Robinson will never take over from Paisley. Paisley has the religious leadership. That is a very important issue for the DUP members. Robinson is not in that league.

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Taoiseach:

Yes but when he came back from London he had to defer to Robinson -

Carson:

Robinson is very close to the paramilitaries. Some say he may even be a card carrying member of the UDA -

Gusty Spence is exercising a very strong moderating influence on the UVF. He believes that the MPs should stay at Westminster.

Robinson has lost a lot of respect in East Belfast because of his identification with the paramilitaries.

Taoiseach:

Yes, I noticed he pulled back very rapidly from some positions last week. Why?

Carson:

That was as a result of pressure on him.

Redpath:

The remarkable thing is that the paramilitaries have never got support from the Unionists at the ballot box. The older people on the Shankill remember what happened in 1974. They do not want the paramilitaries controlling the streets and knocking on doors. They do not want that sort of influence on teenagers.

Taoiseach:

How can the chain between Paisley - Robinson and the paramilitaries be broken?

Carson:

Robinson will destroy himself. His link with the paramilitaries has only recently been widely recognised in Northern Ireland.

Taoiseach:

We believe very strongly in getting the parties together in Northern Ireland on devolution. We are prepared to give priority to that. But the sort of stories that are spread in Northern Ireland that I am for that and that the British Prime Minister is against it are doing a lot of damage.

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Carson:

Those stories are being spread by Robinson - deliberately.

Taoiseach:

Yes. To split the unity of approach between the British and Irish Governments. That must be fully understood. The British and Irish Governments move together on this.

Carson:

If the British Government agreed

Taoiseach:

This story that she is an obstacle to progress is very unhelpful.

Carson:

We are approaching the marching season again.

Taoiseach:

The timing is most important. We are now at mid-April. We don't know what would come out of talks about devolution. There is talk about chairmen of committees etc. What happens if the whole thing breaks down just at the height of the marching season. That would be very dangerous.

Carson:

The Agreement is there to stay. The Unionists realise now that they have to come up with something better. They accept at last that the curtain is down and that they must work seriously on the devolution talks.

Redpath:

It will always be said that the Agreement was what brought the whole thing to a satisfactory conclusion - if that is what happens.

Taoiseach:

In theory everything can be devolved under the Agreement. But there are obvious difficulties in relation to the army, in relation to human rights and in relation to the courts.

Anything which is devolved ceases to be the business of the Conference. Is there any possibility of getting Paisley involved in the talks.

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Redpath:

The draft document was shown to Paisley and Robinson. Paisley subsequently mentioned it to John Hume. This was the first that Hume heard of the talks. This was the reason why the document got such a bad reception in that quarter.

If talks were to go ahead I imagine that they would be given to the "second tier boys". Paisley and Molyneaux would stay well back.

Taoiseach:

That's the problem. What authority would this have and would Robinson or McCusker or Taylor be serious about it? The basic question is how to get to the next stage. The marching season is approaching. There is nothing in the London talks to get Paisley and Molyneaux orientated towards the devolution problem.

You can take it that I would like to facilitate these talks. Bear in mind that the Conference meetings do take place at varying intervals. If anything is to happen, we must be sure that the talks will work.

There was then some further discussion on the timing of the talks and the imminence of the marching season and on the question of the capability of the leadership on the Unionist side being able to deliver.

The meeting then concluded.

18 April, 1986.

c.c. Tánaiste
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Minister for Justice
Attorney General

and Ambassador Dorr and Messrs Ward, Donlon, Russell, Lillis and O'Tuathail.