



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

BÉAL FEIRSTE

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT

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20 November 1986



Mr. Eamonn O Tuathail  
Assistant Secretary  
Anglo-Irish Division  
Department of Foreign Affairs

24/11/86  
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cc Taoiseach  
Minister  
Secretary  
Mr. Nally  
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Dear Assistant Secretary

I had a long conversation today with John McConnell in the Political Affairs Division of the Northern Ireland Office at my request. I had asked for the meeting so that I could discuss with him his views of where we are now, following the unionist parade of last weekend.

The RUC have revised their figure of the numbers of persons who attended the parade on 15 November to mark their continued protest against the Anglo-Irish Agreement. They believe that approximately 300,000 persons were present. That figure is not disputed by the Army. I expressed a little surprise that the figure was so high, particularly when the original police figure was 100,000. McConnell replied by saying that the numbers were certainly much bigger than last year and that given the amount of space occupied by the demonstrators, the police figure could well be accurate.

Those present consisted of all ages and all backgrounds. The reports from those persons the British had placed in the parade would indicate that the major disruptive element, supporters of Paisley in the main, was well to the fore of the crowd, while the more moderate OUP supporters tended to be towards the

back. The view of those who were present was that Molyneaux was better received than Paisley and that this underlies the probability that the OUP has now re-established itself as the foremost party in the unionist community. If the RUC estimate is accurate then one out of every two unionist voters in Northern Ireland was present at the demonstration. McConnell's conclusion is that there is no significant movement of opinion within the unionist community towards support of the Agreement. Nor has there been any movement towards an apathetic acceptance of the Agreement. The demonstration clearly shows a continued opposition.

A very large amount of transport from all over Northern Ireland was laid on to bring people into Belfast and the demonstration had a fiesta like air about it, not dissimilar to the atmosphere on the 12th. This certainly helped to bring out the crowd. As against that, there was little, if any, overt intimidation of shopkeepers to close their shops and surprisingly some shops remained open in places like Lisburn and Holywood. The demonstration was on the whole a peaceful one and the numbers involved in confrontations with the police were few. There had been some violence on Friday night but surprisingly little violence on the Saturday evening. McConnell suggested that there was no violence on the Saturday because the unionist leadership realised that the size of the demonstration meant that they didn't need any further violence. The unionist case now is that if the British Government does not move on the Agreement in the light of such a massive demonstration, then the antagonism to the Agreement will become violent. McConnell himself thought that the DUP, given the resurgence in the OUP, is beginning to behave like a worried and cornered animal.

He said that the RTE-Counterpoint programme on TV on the 13th of November had a profound effect in Northern Ireland. Both Ministers, Mr. Barry and Mr. King, had in his view been excellent and the words of the Minister for the RUC had had a dramatic effect in the unionist community. He said that the

Minister was being praised for coming out straight in favour of the RUC where the SDLP continued to equivocate. The SDLP are seen in unionist circles as having been triumphalist during the last year. He thought that the Minister had come a little close to that in his Sunday radio interview where the impression was given that unionists must be faced down. He thought it important that nothing be said in the coming months which could suggest triumphalism on our part and is strongly of the view that any repetition by the Minister of his words on the RUC would be very helpful. He agreed that from the nationalist point of view the Northern Ireland panel on the RTE-Counterpoint programme was unbalanced and he said that one member of the panel worked in the Sinn Fein press office.

Turning to the District Councils he said that the DUP have come out in favour of resignations from the District Councils. The OUP Steering Committee, which met on 17 November, decided after a heated debate to recommend to their councillors that they resign their seats. The decision was not unanimous. OUP councillors are to meet next Wednesday, 26 November, to decide on their policy. In the meantime, there have been some interesting developments. Antrim District Council met yesterday, councillors did not resign, and they took decisions about the provision of services which would enable the clerk of the Council to carry on the normal functions of the Council for another six months. Castlereagh District Council, of which Peter Robinson is Chairman, met this morning. The DUP gave their letters of resignation to Robinson but not to the clerk and the Council is to meet again next week. McConnell does not know what decisions the OUP councillors are likely to come to but the British are examining what might happen if the unionist councillors resign their seats.

A majority of Councils are unionist controlled. Some of them could operate even if the unionist councillors resign their seats as legally a Council can function provided it has a

quorum. A quorum is one quarter of the seats. The legislation provides that a Council can co-opt a candidate to a vacant seat. It is, therefore, legal for a quorum to co-opt Council members to the seats left vacant by the unionists if the latter should resign. However, a co-option could only be made following a unanimous decision by the remaining members of the Council. McConnell thinks it most unlikely that the Alliance Party would agree with the Provisional Sinn Fein on co-options. If those who remain on the Council, previously unionist controlled, decide to co-opt persons to the Council who are on the whole broadly representative then the British Government could live with such Councils. It remains to be seen, of course, whether the unionist protest would permit persons from within the majority community to accept co-options to Councils.

However it could happen that the remaining councillors, forming a quorum might co-opt persons of their own persuasion leading to a nationalist/Alliance controlled Council in place of a hitherto unionist controlled Council. This could, e.g., happen in Lisburn. It remains the prerogative of the Government to disband and put in a Commissioner where the Council is not fullfilling its statutory functions or is not capable of fullfilling its statutory functions. I had a clear impression that were there to be, e.g., a nationalist controlled Council in Lisburn, then the British would seriously consider saying that such a Council, non-representative of the majority of the population of Lisburn would not be capable of fullfilling its statutory functions. Where no quorum exists in unionist controlled Councils a Commissioner has to be appointed and he would have to instruct the clerk to hold new elections within a six week period. McConnell speculated that it would take one or two weeks to put such machinery in order and would therefore hazard a guess that where a Council, following resignations, is left without a working quorum, fresh elections would be held within about 8 weeks.

McConnell thought the situation in the nationalist controlled Councils was somewhat different. It is possible that the

unionists would not resign their seats in nationalist controlled councils. Even if they did, the British view would be not to interfere. British policy at the present time in regard to all Councils is to stand off. They are not commenting publicly on what is happening, as they do not wish to give the unionists the impression that they are concerned. One particular aspect which is worrying is that there is a possibility that the unionists may utilise a half penny or penny in the pound of the rates for an anti-Agreement campaign. They are apparently able legally to make use of such funds for purposes which could be stretched to including an anti-Agreement campaign.

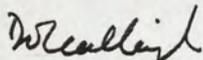
McConnell summed up by saying that the Official Unionists are confused. They remain uncertain about the future. They are worried about the direction being taken by the DUP and they are particularly worried by the Ulster Resistance movement. The more demonstrations addressed by Paisley and Robinson the more the Official Unionists will begin to question the OUP-DUP pact and it remains a strong possibility that the pact will not last.

McConnell then turned to the question of the Irish language. He said that the absolutist demands of the SDLP, with regard to the language, are causing difficulties with the proposals we made to the British. He said that the SDLP, for example, have taken a policy decision that one Irish lesson per day be provided for all pupils in schools within a 10 year period. This smacks of compulsion. He believes the SDLP is asking for too much and that they are asking for things which are not supported by the broad mass of nationalists in Northern Ireland. They are providing an opportunity for unionists (and for those in the Civil Service who support the unionist case) to organise opposition against any movement on the Irish language. It is accepted that we asked for practical and achievable measures but there is a view, and this is shared by Mawhinney, that what we asked for is but the thin edge of the wedge and is to be followed by the whole SDLP policy which amounts to bilingualism. He said that our proposals on the Irish language are the single most divisive issue in terms of

the Agreement in the Northern Ireland administration and he appealed strongly that we try to encourage the SDLP to take a more achievable line instead.

As I have previously reported, McConnell is a Northern Ireland Catholic. He believes that the most striking thing about the last year is that nationalists do not understand how important the Agreement is. Had he been asked a few years ago could an Agreement of this type have been achieved and would there be a Joint Secretariat in Belfast, he couldn't have conceived it. To some extent the unionists are more aware of the historical importance of the Agreement than nationalists. McConnell believes that progress on the issues referred to in the Agreement and in the communique of 1985 has been slower than advisable. He believes the British side should implement the various issues as quickly as possible. He does not think the Flags and Emblems and the Irish language, etc., will result in nationalists becoming exultant about the Agreement. On the other hand, were progress not to be made on these issues, it would have very damaging consequences in the nationalist community for the Agreement. He agrees with Mallon that the question to be asked of nationalists is not "what has the Agreement achieved?" but "do you want to return to the situation which existed before the Agreement?" His message in short was to implement these issues quickly and then concentrate publicly on the Agreement itself, rather than on the measures on which we have been concentrating ~~on~~ so far. He added that the only issues which will win widespread nationalist support in West Belfast for the Agreement are economic progress and jobs.

Yours sincerely



Daithi O Ceallaigh