



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Conversations at the Irish News

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1. I called on Terry McLoughlin, Deputy Editor, and Willie Graham, Political Correspondent, at the Irish News in the course of my visit to Belfast on 28 November. I first had a brief conversation with Terry McLoughlin which centered on the difficulties which the Irish News had with the Civil Service Commission and the Department of the Public Service in relation to the placement of advertisements for posts in the Irish Civil Service. During the previous week, McLoughlin had contacted me in a very agitated state because advertisements for positions in the Public Service had been published in the Belfast Telegraph and, contrary to previous practice, they had not been placed in the Irish News. In addition, on this occasion the Irish language version of the advertisements had been published by the Telegraph. McLoughlin was annoyed by the fact that the Irish Government had paid for an advertisement in Irish in the Belfast Telegraph since it was the policy of that paper not to publish names or placenames in Irish. He felt that before paying for an advertisement to be published in Irish in the Belfast Telegraph, we should have insisted that the Editorial Board change its attitude to the use of names and placenames in Irish.
2. We had received immediate assistance from the Department of the Public Service in clarifying the position about the placing of advertisements from the Civil Service Commission in the Irish News and I was able to inform McLoughlin, some hours after he had raised the issue, that advertisements would be placed in his newspaper as well as in the Belfast Telegraph. We also had a lengthy discussion on his concern about the publication of advertisements in Irish in the Belfast Telegraph and at the end of which he agreed that it was a welcome development that the Belfast Telegraph had

now accepted an advertisement in the Irish language and that it would have been foolish for us not to have taken advantage of this change of attitude.

3. At the outset of our conversation in the Irish News on Friday last, McLoughlin expressed his appreciation for the speedy response which we had received from the Department of the Public Service. He went on, however, to say that the Irish News was finding it particularly difficult to obtain advertising from other Irish official agencies and particularly from some semi-State bodies. He instanced in particular the decision by Aer Lingus to fund special supplements in the Belfast Telegraph as well as in the Cork Examiner around the time of their 50th anniversary celebrations. Despite the fact that the Irish News had lobbied Aer Lingus for some additional advertising around the time of the anniversary celebrations, they had received none. He said that at the same time the newspaper was experiencing a decline in advertising revenue which was due, in his view, almost exclusively, to the paper's support for the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Over the last few years the paper had been increasing its advertising revenue from people within the unionist community, particularly in the agricultural sector, partly due to the fact that the paper had significantly extended its coverage of agricultural issues. I told McLoughlin that semi-State bodies tended to take a hard-nosed approach to advertising in general and they were very reluctant to take any advice which was based on considerations other than strictly commercial ones. Nonetheless, I undertook to do whatever I could with a letter which he said he would write to me explaining the difficulties which the Irish News are experiencing in their relationship with the public sector in obtaining advertising.

4. I then had a meeting with Willie Graham, Political Correspondent to the Irish News. Graham said that they had received a very positive reaction to the Taoiseach's recent

interview in the newspaper. He was conscious of the fact that the Government was concerned not to have a high profile around the time of the anniversary of the Agreement and this added to his own sense of appreciation for the Taoiseach's time and for the efforts made by the Government Press Secretary in arranging the interview. We then had a brief discussion about overall coverage of political issues in the Irish News and I expressed some concern about the recent drift, although not in editorial coverage, but rather in general news coverage which was tending to highlight in a very favourable manner the position of Sinn Fein in a number of key social and economic policy areas. Granam said that on a personal level he accepted that there was some accuracy to the observation but he did not accept it as a legitimate criticism of the newscoverage in the paper. The fact was that Sinn Fein had a much more professional approach to the media than other political parties, in particular the SDLP. While Dan Keenan, the Press Officer of the SDLP, (who was appointed to that position only a year ago), was performing a very good job, he simply was not being given the resources or indeed at times the information to maximise the impact of the party's policies in a number of areas. On the Divis flats issue the paper had been subjected to considerable abuse from Sinn Fein activists for recognising the crucial role played by the Irish Government in reversing British policy on the flats. Graham, however, went on to say that Jim Fitzpatrick, the Editor of the newspaper, was again taking a more active role in the day-to-day management of the newspaper than he had over the last year. Consequently, he felt that there would be a more critical monitoring of decisions taken at news editor level, particularly where there might be a divergence between news coverage and editorial policy.

5. Granam felt that the most that could be said about the SDLP annual conference was that it was well organised. Like Jim Dougal, he felt that there had been a very large number of

Americans present and he was somewhat surprised that those traditionally hostile to the SDLP had not highlighted this fact and renewed allegations about N.D.I. funding. He said that a good deal of discussion at the conference had tended to focus on the Taoiseach's devolution speech at the Studies seminar and on the remarks of the Minister for Foreign Affairs on nationalists joining the RUC on the Today-Tonight UTV/Channel Four link up programme. He felt that there was general resistance among constituency representatives to the ideas being put forward by the Taoiseach in relation to devolution in the security area. While some recognised that the SDLP would have to play its full part in all the institutions and processes in Northern Ireland in the event of substantial agreement on devolved government, the great majority felt that it was premature to raise the prospect of major movement in that direction this time.

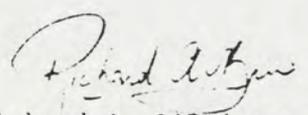
6. Graham felt that the reaction to the remarks on the RUC by the Minister for Foreign Affairs was more varied. While the majority in the party still sympathised with the Seamus Mallon approach to the RUC, a not insignificant minority felt that the time had come for the party to take a more open attitude to the RUC. This view was coming from people like Brid Rodgers and to a lesser extent from Joe Hendron and Eddie McGrady. There was also the pragmatic view that since there were difficulties and risks on both sides of the argument, it was far better to sit on the fence. Nonetheless a number of delegates whom he had spoken to at the Conference supported the Minister's remarks as tactically advantageous since they would put the British Government and the RUC under considerable pressure to deliver further improvements in the relationship between the nationalist community and the security forces. Graham felt that a number of the delegates at the Conference were also disappointed that the Code of Conduct which had been promised a year ago, and which would be disciplinary, had not yet been finalised. Graham felt that if the Minister's

remarks could be seen to lead to the early publication and acceptance of the Code of Conduct then this would also be a significant boost to the nationalist community's confidence in the Anglo-Irish Agreement. On a personal level, Graham said that he supported the Minister's call on members of the nationalist community to join the RUC and that he would be attempting to press for the acceptance of the Minister's statement at editorial level in the paper although it would be difficult for them to move significantly ahead of the stated policy of the SDLP.

7. Graham said that the Stalker affair continued to be a major issue in the relationship between the nationalist community and the security forces. While he recognised that the Stalker affair itself raised important issues about the overall structure of the RUC as well as about the conduct of RUC officers at a very senior level in the force, the point was not being effectively made that the Stalker affair predated the Agreement and the circumstances which Stalker investigated predated the lifetime of the present Irish Government. The prolonging of the entire affair and the currency of commentary on it was doing unjustifiable damage to the increasing professionalism of the RUC. Further it was minimising the potential which the RUC has for developing a new relationship with the nationalist community in view of the manner in which they have performed their duties since the Agreement came into force. Graham believed that it was wrong for Seamus Mallon to have called for the resignation of the Chief Constable at the SDLP Party Conference and it was "over the top" for him subsequently to have described the administration of justice in Northern Ireland as "fundamentally unjust". Graham said that Hume was taking a much more nuanced position towards the RUC. He recently had a lengthy interview with Hume in which they had discussed the RUC among a number of other issues. When Graham had written up the interview, Hume telephoned him and asked him to read over the statements which he had made about the RUC. Hume

had made some slight alterations which didn't really change the substance of what he said but the entire experience had given a clear indication of Hume's sensitivity about the whole issue.

- 8. One of the dominant concerns within the SDLP, and this was clear from their Annual Conference, is their anxiety not to give any advantages to Sinn Fein and to begin the process of increasing their representation at Westminster. Graham thinks that it is too early to make any predictions about their likely electoral successes but he thinks that "the tide" is beginning to turn in their direction in West Belfast and in Fermanagh South Tyrone. (He believes that Eddie McGrady has a real prospect of winning the South Down seat). However the SDLP's problems in West Belfast remain enormous - their organisation in the constituency hardly exists, the competition for the nominations leaves the membership disorganised and, perhaps most important, Adams continues to be an effective local representative and a popular figure in the Constituency. While incidents like the Newry bombing will damage Sinn Fein it is still difficult to gauge the extent to which these incidents lead people to recoil from Sinn Fein. Graham believes that the development of the political process and the credibility given to it by the Agreement is the only effective way of winning support away from Sinn Fein.



Richard A. O'Brien,  
2 December 1986.

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