



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Meeting with East Belfast Community Workers

Last evening I met eight members of the East Belfast Community Council. Their religious and social backgrounds were mixed, but they shared a strong opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. A number of them had hoped to voice their opposition personally to the Taoiseach in December but were unable to attend the meeting that had been arranged because news of it had leaked to the Belfast press. At my meeting I was accompanied by Frank Moran, a Fine Gael member and social worker. The meeting lasted for about three and a half hours.

The atmosphere was frank and friendly, though what they had to say ranged from the pessimistic to the chilling. The same group had recently met Mr Nicholas Scott and told ^{him} them what they told me. His responses appear to have been low-key: I was told that they got more out of me because I was not a politician. I have attempted below to order what was necessarily a random discussion under various headings.

A The Setting of the Agreement

Familiar objections were made to the fact that the Agreement was foisted on unionists: their sense of hurt obviously runs deep, particularly in working-class areas. Advance briefing of SDLP was also resented, as was the fact that they had "opted out" out of talking to their Northern neighbours. I explained the reasons, as outlined by the Taoiseach in the Downtown Radio phone-in, why negotiations had to be undertaken in this way despite his earlier strong reservations about this approach. Frank Moran, from his experience as a social worker used the analogy of dealing with a family where there are problems: at some point a seemingly crude decision has to be taken.

B The Present Situation

1 Harsh Realities

Some of the realities, experienced by those men and women on the ground were harsh indeed. They included:

- The Agreement will never be accepted, for reasons that are as strong as they are irrational.
- Recruitment by the (presumably loyalist) paramilitaries is proceeding daily. Dates have been set for armed resistance to the Agreement, including a campaign in this State: "The fuse is ready to be lit".
- Community workers such as themselves are no longer welcome in Protestant areas.
- The House of Commons vote in favour of the Agreement is irrelevant as the Tories, Labour and Alliance parties have no representation in Northern Ireland.
- British involvement and detachment in its colonies was being repeated now with the North. The Irish Government has been conned about the real British intentions (i.e. withdrawal).

2 Misconceptions

Some of the above 'realities' may be more appropriate among the following:

- Dublin only signed the Agreement because it wanted money from the U.S.
- The Agreement was the first^{time} that Dublin has said it was interested in the North or in eliminating terrorism.
- Mrs Thatcher and her Ministers had not read the Agreement text. They agreed because their civil servants recommended it.

3 Questions to be Answered

Among questions asked were:

- Did both sides think through the Agreement to this stage of mounting unionist opposition? If they did not, then they will be answerable for the bloodbath which is coming.
- Why does the Irish version of the Agreement not mention "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" like the British version does? Which version was lodged with the U.N.? Which version takes precedence?
- What is the role of the Irish Government vis-a-vis the Northern police and courts, if not interference?
- Was a main purpose of the Agreement to activate a unionist response such as we have seen from Robinson and McKusker?
- Were the British side in particular aware of the extent to which unionists would oppose the Agreement?

C Future Options

The following suggestions were made in the light of the Agreement being scrapped, though one who was more aware of political subtleties felt that a "freezing" of the Agreement and moving in a new direction could be presented as a "development" or "second phase" of the Agreement.

The most positive suggestion along the "phase 2" line was that McKusker and Robinson be taken up on their offer of tripartite talks. It was strongly felt that they were bluffing (in order to appear reasonable) and that the bluff should be called. One suggestion was that political development might occur in an EC context since (a) it is larger than the six county hothouse and (b) it is the only area in which all parties willingly participate at Parliamentary level; this includes Sinn Fein who said they would take Euro-seats if elected.

Unemployment and lack of State support for community work such as they are doing were seen as contributing to the problem. It was not felt that U.S. money could alleviate anything: some said it would be seen as a bribe. It was emphasised that ordinary people did not understand or care about the subtle political

wording of the Agreement and unemployment made young people an easy target for those offering guns.

Despite the friendliness and exchange of good personal wishes, there was no doubting their message to Dublin: the Ulster Clubs are arming and a bloodbath is imminent. Food is being hoarded for weeks in the Ardoyne. Southern and British politicians are seen as clueless about what is happening on the ground. Northern politicians are seen as increasingly irrelevant: they have no influence at Westminster and loyalist paramilitaries see them as marginal now that the by-elections are over.

By the time we reached the Border, the warnings delivered at the meeting seemed as unreal as they do to me in Dublin now. Increasing support in the South for the Agreement undoubtedly indicates collective sighs of relief that something has at last been done, now on to the next business....We need to remind ourselves, I suppose that the Marching Season is less than ^{four} months away.

John Fanagan
14 February 1986