



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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The Political Situation in Northern Ireland - one year on

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1. Among the objectives of the architects of the Agreement was the creation of conditions in which agreed political structures could be established in Northern Ireland. This has not yet been achieved, but the Agreement has become the focus of political debate in Northern Ireland and has provoked a considerable rethinking of old established attitudes among unionists, while giving a boost to constitutional nationalism. It has proved resilient to unionist threats and to paramilitary violence. Unlike previous efforts to deal with Northern Ireland situation, it still appears capable of increasing its strength and achieving its objectives over time while the others - Sunningdale, the Constitutional Convention, the Constitutional Conference and even the Assembly had already been destroyed or had clearly been seen to be incapable of dealing with the issues within a year of their establishment.

The Agreement has survived, and like direct rule it can go on surviving as it is dependant only on the will of the two Governments. However, as 300,000 (according to latest RUC figures) unionists on the streets of Belfast showed on 15 November 1986, devolution on the lines envisaged by the Agreement still seems a long way off.

Nationalists

2. Nationalists are in general firmly opposed to the dismantlement or abolition of the Agreement, and feel more or less disappointment at the rate of progress in dealing with the discrimination and inequality which the Agreement itself recognises need to be removed. This disappointment relates not so much perhaps to the actual progress made, but rather to the expectations aroused at the signing of the Agreement and in

particular the speed of implementation suggested in the Hillsborough Communique and revived again in August with Minister Scott's confirmation of leaks of an autumn package (repeal of Flags and Emblems, official recognition of Irish street signs, ban on incitement to hatred and legal redress for people facing sectarian discrimination, legislation on police complaints and changes in Public Order laws dealing with RUC control of marches, consideration of Bill of Rights and Three-Judge Courts). Autumn has come and gone without significant progress being made in most of these areas.

3. There is a further possible factor. Sinn Fein have been saying that, in return for 'giving up' as they see it on a united Ireland, nationalists have got no concessions and are suffering increased intimidation and sectarian attacks. The fact that some British Ministers have continued to give from time to time an exaggerated pro-unionist interpretation of Article 1 and have sought to distance themselves and the announcement of measures to benefit nationalists from the Agreement framework, thereby unintentionally echoing aspects of the Sinn Fein message, has perhaps also contributed to the sense of disappointment and uncertainty among nationalists.

4. In the vital area of security, there have been some spectacular efforts by the RUC to protect nationalists - (Portadown, Easter Monday (daytime) march and 6 July, for example, and a generalised increase in responsiveness to Catholics' difficulties. However, there have also been some bad miscalculations in terms of building up nationalist confidence - using Portadown again for example, the failure to anticipate the middle of the night march at Easter and the Garvaghy Road decision for the 12 July march, together with the difficulties of dealing effectively with intimidation and sectarian killings (the IRA's murder of Bingham in Belfast seems to have been more effective than the RUC efforts). The signals to nationalists

are still therefore somewhat confused and with the pall of the affairs Stalker was investigating still overhanging the RUC, confidence building is going to be a slow process. At the SDLP annual Conference, Mallon delivered a very strong attack on Herman over the Stalker investigations. John Hume was very critical of the idea that security could be devolved in *anyone's lifetime. Many delegates were also unhappy with the* Minister's comments on Catholics joining the RUC.

### Electoral Strength

5. The signing of the Agreement and the rapid establishment of its Conference and Secretariat, together with the resolution of the Christmas 1985 hunger strike gave a considerable boost to the SDLP who took a seat from the unionists in the January by-elections and, in the four constituencies where both SDLP and Sinn Fein stood, the SDLP percentage of the vote increased by one fifth while that of Sinn Fein fell by a quarter compared with 1983. SDLP performance in by-elections since has not been spectacular: they and Sinn Fein have broadly retained their 1985 positions but the SDLP has taken a seat (Magherafelt Council) from Sinn Fein. Gerry Adams is understood to be worried about maintaining Sinn Fein support in West Belfast. However, the recent Marplan poll which gave Sinn Fein only 3% of the vote and the SDLP 27% is not indicative of real voting intentions. In the first place, Sinn Fein does much worse in opinion polls than in elections and secondly, some aspects of the poll we are aware of - the size of the sample was 750, where 1,000 is normally regarded as the minimum acceptable sample in Northern Ireland, the classification of voters by parties represented in Westminster (thereby excluding Alliance) - leads us to doubt the reliability of the whole exercise.

### Devolution - nationalist attitudes

6. Ben Caraher made efforts last February to agree on devolved structures with the Charter Group but these discussions were

not completed when J. Hume indicated that they were not authorised by nor were the results acceptable to him. Hume has repeatedly made it clear, however, that he is anxious for talks and particularly since September has been actively involved in efforts to get talks going. He participated in Sir Frederick Catherwood's efforts in September and has recently made contact with H. West and the Charter group. Reports from the Unionist side suggest that they do not think these talks will lead to anything. (Hume will participate in a further effort being launched by the Chairmen of the 4 major economic bodies in the North (IDB, LEDU, E/Ulster and NIEC). Hume's room for manoeuvre is however limited. His party executive has passed a resolution in his absence banning talks with unionists other than party leaders. While he has interpreted this as a ban on "negotiations" it indicates the degree of uncertainty in the party about talks and about giving any individual, even Hume, the right to make the running this area.

There is little or no discussion about forms of devolution among nationalists, or even within the SDLP. However, the general view might be stated as opposition to any concessions on the Agreement (McGrady made his position clear on this during the Catherwood discussions) and to accepting anything less than powersharing. There were a number of opportunities in the last 12 years, when the SDLP could have had majority rule systems with some advisory or committee role for the opposition, it rejected these as totally inadequate and cannot now be expected to accept less - particularly as the Conference is not proving to be so effective an alternative channel as to make up for a lack of real influence in Government in Northern Ireland.

#### Non-nationalist support

7. The support for the Agreement given by the Alliance Party and the pronouncements of Protestant Churches have been important, indicating that the purpose of the Agreement to deal even handedly with both communities is understood and

appreciated outside of the nationalist community. The practical and effective steps taken by the Alliance Party to tackle the boycott policy of the OUP/DUP at Council level has been very helpful in pressurising them to stop the policy and go back to work. Reviews of the Anglo-Irish Agreement which at best ignored the Alliance Party or at worst said it was hopelessly split, following closely on the unreliable Marplan poll (which indicated a complete collapse of the Alliance vote) have been damaging to it. Alliance itself believes that it has been maintaining and even increasing support. The SDLP are close rivals of the Alliance for votes and so will do nothing to be helpful to Alliance: on the other hand, it would be a psychological blow to the Agreement if Alliance were to 'desert'. Alliance for its part has welcomed the Extradition Bill and the Minister's remarks concerning the RUC. Cushnahan said its continued support for the Agreement is however conditional on the SDLP being more helpful.

8. The Northern Ireland Consensus Group, composed of very moderate unionists, also spoke out initially in favour of the Agreement, but they are a small group within the unionist community and have not been able to make headway against the general trend. Efforts by Bloomfield and now by the four major industrial bodies to get talks started, indicate a willingness to start from the Agreement, if not to work within it, but while such groups are important economically, they do not command significant political support.

#### Unionists

9. One year on, the majority of unionists are still opposed to the Agreement and believe it can be destroyed. The unionist leadership had decided to oppose whatever would come out of the Anglo-Irish process and almost six months before it was signed had set up a joint OUP/DUP working party to devise ways of defeating it. They had a series of measures - marches, civil disobediences, resignation of seats etc - planned before the Agreement was signed and so were ready to go into action.

Their explanation of the Agreement as providing a worthless guarantee to them in the first few lines of Article 1, a highly valuable and effective encouragement to nationalists in the last few lines of the same Article, and dictatorship by a London/Dublin Joint Authority in all of the other Articles, took hold among unionists and has not yet been dispelled.

10. This is in part because of the deepseated dislike of the Republic, the provincial nature of unionist politics and its unwillingness to listen to anyone other than their own leaders, but also the NIO public relations in Northern Ireland were perhaps not as effective as they might have been, while some of the more enthusiastic aspects of the Agreement's welcome in this State and the public disagreements between London and Dublin about the Agreement also have helped confirm unionists in their views. While reports - in particular from Chris Patten - make it clear that the unionist leadership cannot have been ignorant of what was likely to be in the Agreement, it did come as a shock to most ordinary unionists for whom political beliefs and expectations had frozen in 1920. Furthermore, unionists have always seen politics as a zero sum game and have interpreted the Agreement in those terms: they do not see that it offers an opportunity to move away from such an approach to one where both sides operating from the basis of equality can move forward together.

11. Having failed to move the two Governments by their battery of reaction in December-January 85/86, Paisley and Molyneaux arrived at the outline of an agreement with the British Prime Minister in February 1986, but on their return to Belfast were unable to carry their supporters and the Day of Action (3 March) followed accompanied by considerable paramilitary activity. Since then, the anti-Agreement campaign has swung to and away from an increasing paramilitary role while efforts to start talks have failed to progress because in general unionists want the Agreement to be abolished or at least on the table for discussions and if this is not possible

now, are willing to wait until after the elections to see if prospects will be better then.

12. Molyneaux has at times been drawn into incautious statements through the Joint Unionist Working Party, but he is opposed to violence, exercising a restraining influence in so far as he can. Although an integrationist at heart, he seems to understand that this is not possible. Although involved in the joint OUP/DUP anti-Agreement campaign, he does not give the impression that he believes it can be destroyed except as a result of a change of Government in London or Dublin. Despite turning out 300,000 in a (reasonably) well ordered rally on 15/11/86 Archer has indicated that he thought Molyneaux and Paisley were very depressed at their meeting with Kinnock 18/11/86 and anxious to have talks - but not if the Conference and Secretariat continue. Bell thought Molyneaux was less anxious for the talks. Both confirm that the question of Unionist support in a hung Parliament was not discussed. Leaving aside his views on the Agreement, Molyneaux response to the Taoiseach's message conveyed through Eames (April) and to Catherwood (September) indicate that he understands powersharing is necessary. However, as shown at the party Conference on 8 November, he can unite the party only on the anti-Agreement line: knowing himself to be much less of a leader than Faulkner, and knowing Faulkner's fate, it seems unlikely that Molyneaux will attempt to move ahead of general unionist opinion.

13. The OUP itself is the most active of the parties in considering political structures - all outside the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The integrationist wing under R. McCartney suffered a set-back at the party Conference. Given that it represents a superficially attractive but essentially unworkable policy, the set back may just possibly be sufficient to prevent its continued growth to a position of being able to take over the party, although any interest in Britain will certainly encourage it. The Charter Group are somewhat on the fringes - they do not hold central party positions and try to make up for

this by publicising everything they do and almost every contact made with them. Peter Smith, Ray Ferguson and Frank Millar recognise that new structures have to be devised which nationalists themselves regard as acceptable. The Rev. Martin Smyth has devised a federalist majority rule option while H. McCusker pronounces from time to time on independence. The OUP organisation proved strong enough to stop a McCartney takeover. It may possibly be recovering some ground vis a vis the DUP (NIO view of Molyneaux's reception on the 15 November Belfast rally). The OUP Councillors' decision by 82 to 44 (out of 190) not to support the DUP Council resignation policy marks a further split in the joint anti-agreement campaign. The OUP has agreed some further measures such as selective resignations from public boards and collection of signatures for a petition against the Agreement. Some of the resignations might prove awkward - in particular resignation of the 3 OUP and two DUP councillors on the Police Authority, but there is no information as yet as to what bodies it is proposed to hit by resignation, and indeed as in the past the policy may not work. Coleraine Council OUP members ended the boycott of business policy and Antrim members allowed normal business to go ahead within the last week.

14. Paisley now knows enough of politics to see that talks are necessary, (he told Hume in Strasbourg in September that he would accept powersharing) but he appears to be a prisoner of his own fiery past. Either he cannot bring himself to lead his followers on a more conciliatory path, or he can exercise some influence by staying with them but cannot make them change course. His lieutenants - Robinson, Wilson and Wells etc., are well educated and articulate but have no experience of serious politics and do not understand or have any interest in accommodating nationalists. They see paramilitary activity as merely another tactic to be used if suited to their needs.

15. Statements by British Ministers to the effect that the Union can be damaged by the paramilitary activities and attacks on police appear to have little or no impact on the DUP who

would be more inclined to think of independence as an option than the OUP. However, the contradictions of fighting Britain to stay in Britain must become obvious over time, even to the DUP. Some DUP members including Mayor Sandy Spence of Ballymena (who is also a member of the Police Authority) are clearly unhappy even with the policy to resign from their council seats.

In the meantime, devolution arrangements not involving the DUP will be fragile if not impossible to sustain. The DUP clearly has the initiative in terms of policy formation and party organisation and propaganda. Any devolution arrangements are going to involve considerable concessions on the unionist side: if the DUP offers the seeming alternative of making none at all, it is difficult to see the OUP retaining its position as the majority unionist party at a future election.

Anglo-Irish Section  
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