



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Meeting with Mr. Ed Curran,
Deputy Editor and Chief Editorial Writer of the Belfast Telegraph

1. In the course of a visit to Belfast on 30 and 31 March, I had a meeting with Mr. Ed Curran, chief editorial writer and Deputy Editor of the Belfast Telegraph. Curran's strong opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement has softened over the last year and this has to some extent been reflected in the Editorial policy of the Paper. Nonetheless, Curran remains a committed Unionist and a strong supporter of the advocates of devolution within the Official Unionist Party - he would see devolution as the practical alternative to the ideal of integration. He feels, indeed, that the campaign for equal citizenship promoted by Robert McCartney within the OUP has exposed the contradictions in the long standing view within the party that the arguments of the integrationists and of the devolutionists can be reconciled. In Curran's view the debate within the party over the last couple of months has demonstrated that while McCartney's campaign may be compatible with the traditional ideals of Ulster unionism (equal citizenship within the UK), the political reality of 1987 is that Northern Ireland unionists want devolution. Indeed, the basis of the joint DUP/OUP approach to the British Government over a year ago, when seeking an alternative to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, was negotiations for devolution, first, between London and the Northern Ireland parties, and second, between a devolved administration in Belfast and the Governments in Dublin and London.
2. Curran believes that since the failure of that attempt, the integrationist argument has had a certain superficial attractiveness for a great number of unionists mainly because it provided a convenient strategy which enabled them

to avoid the difficult prospect of having to talk with nationalists within the context of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Indeed, Curran believes that it is precisely because integration was seen as the easy option for Unionists and as a convenient code for not talking to nationalists, that the integrationist case has not won support from any significant group or individual within the nationalist community. Curran now believes that the time has come when the continuation of the integrationist/devolutionist debate and the uncertainty it creates will begin to damage the OUP's credibility as well as its ability to distinguish itself decisively from the DUP.

3. Curran believes that unionist opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement is now in complete disarray. With the election in the South some Unionists had hoped that the Agreement would be set aside. They have been disappointed in this and indeed the continued operation of the Agreement has been highlighted by the implementation of the Public Order Order with its three-pronged attack on Ulster loyalism. Curran believes that the Public Order legislation has created subtle but important division within the unionist community. The new regulation on marchers, the changes in incitement to hatred and the new provisions on flags and emblems are all much more of a challenge to Paisleyism than to traditional Unionism. A growing number of the membership of the OUP are beginning to realise this. More Unionists also recognise that the new Irish Government is not going to interrupt the work of the Anglo-Irish Conference or to reduce pressure for reforms which will be of benefit to the nationalist community.
4. Curran believes that while little will happen in advance of the British General Election there are some within the unionist community who hope that their representatives at Westminster will hold the balance of power after the next British general election. Indeed, Curran speculated at some

length about the talks which had taken place between Paisley and Molyneaux on the one hand and a number of Labour party front bench spokesmen on the other hand on Northern Ireland. Curran was inclined to believe that the statement by Mr. Stuart Bell, which he said had been given as an exclusive to the London Times, was intended as a signal from the Labour Party that they were prepared to offer an early review of the Anglo-Irish Agreement to gain unionist support if the British general election produced a hung Parliament. Curran understands that the review was suggested by Bell as part of a four-part package which Labour hope will be sufficient to persuade unionist MPs to vote for a minority Labour Government programme without entering into a formal deal with the Labour Party. Curran also noted that Bell had been careful not to deny the statement that an early review of the Agreement would offer a chance to open a new dialogue about political progress in Northern Ireland. Despite the denial by the party's Northern Ireland spokesman, Mr. Peter Archer, that Bell was reflecting Labour party policy on Northern Ireland, Curran believes that the statement did have the approval of some front bench Labour spokesmen before Bell delivered his statement to the London Times.

5. Curran said that in the course of a recent conversation, he had asked Ken Maginnis M.P. whether or not the Anglo-Irish Agreement could ever be made acceptable to the Unionist community. Curran was surprised when Maginnis replied that the Anglo-Irish Agreement could be made acceptable "if and when the killing stopped". Curran said that the depressing reality was that the Provisional IRA recognised this and consequently they believed that the killing must continue. Curran argued that it is also widely accepted that there is no "acceptable level of violence" in Northern Ireland, or indeed anywhere, and that consequently "security policy must necessarily precede political progress". He detected a growing weariness throughout the community towards violence and a belief that the right security policy is the atmosphere in and through which political progress can be

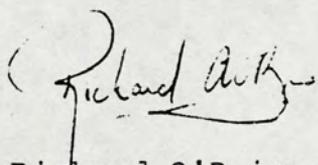
made. This, he said was the basis upon which he recently had an interesting discussion with Austin Currie, about the SDLP's reluctance to give full support to the RUC. He believes that the SDLP's policy on the RUC is now one of the major obstacles to political progress in Northern Ireland. He recognised that Currie had advanced a convincing argument that the SDLP had brought the nationalist community to the stage where they could accept an internal settlement without prejudice to their longer term ambition for a united Ireland. Currie argued, that having brought the nationalist community so far, some response was now required from political Unionism. Currie said that in the absence of such a response, no one could expect the leadership of the nationalist community to legitimise the activities of the local law enforcement agency. If the SDLP did not have a real input into the policy direction of the Northern Ireland administration it could not give a "blank cheque" to an agency taking its authority from that administration. Curran said that while he sympathised with much of this he felt that the unionist community could not understand why constitutional nationalists on the one hand condemned attacks on the RUC by the IRA, indeed totally rejected the IRA, and yet could not support, without reservation, the RUC and encourage, as did the former Minister for Foreign Affairs, members of the minority community to join the RUC. He was strongly critical of a number of statements on the RUC made by the SDLP which he felt were destructive of RUC morale following a period in which they had been viciously attacked by Loyalist bullyboys. He did have some sympathy for the moral argument that it was difficult to encourage members of the nationalist community to join the RUC when, by so doing, they identified themselves as targets for the IRA.

6. Curran said that he welcomed the recent statement by Dr. Edward Daly, the Bishop of Derry, that funerals at which there were parliamentary displays could no longer be conducted within the precincts of Catholic churches in

Derry. He thought that this was a particularly courageous statement although it appeared to apply only to funerals taking place within the city of Derry and not within the Diocese of Derry. However he hoped that it would be taken up by other Catholic Bishops in Northern Ireland. He felt that it was one of the most important statements made by a Catholic Bishop in Northern Ireland in recent times, and he hoped that it would draw a strong response of support from other Churches in Northern Ireland, in particular, from the Presbyterian Church, which still continued to operate to some extent under the threatening shadow of Paisley's Free Presbyterian Church. He said that a number of people hoped for a more constructive General Synod of the Presbyterian Church under their new moderator, John Thompson, and for a better atmosphere in inter-Church relations in the coming year.

7. Curran also mentioned the question of cross-border economic cooperation. He said that this was an area in which he thought that considerable progress could be made particularly by a skilful use of the funds available under the International Fund for Ireland. He said that he was impressed by reports of the number of applications for assistance to the Fund and he agreed with the general approach that the Fund should help job creation programmes particularly in border areas. He also wondered if the two governments might not renew their efforts to persuade the EEC to make a major contribution to the International Fund. He understood that the difficulties on this issue had arisen on the British side and he thought it was a pity that whatever administrative obstacles existed had not been overcome to enable the Community to make a major contribution to the Fund.
8. In the course of the above Curran made a number of critical remarks about the cross border road system and he complained of a number of recent instances in which he had personally experienced the poor quality of roads at traditional border

crossing points. He felt that the poor quality of the road system was due in large measure to the way in which both Governments had in the past looked at the entire question of cross border transport communications systems. He thought that there was a convincing case to be made for formally designating ports of exit for Britain and for the Continent in both parts of Ireland (e.g., Larne and Rosslare). This would require the development of economic incentives to use these exit and entry points as well as the significant improvement of the Belfast-Rosslare road link. This was surely an area which the European Community might look at in a positive way as part of their regional policy and as an attempt to counterbalance the centralising effects of EEC economic policy.



Richard O'Brien,
Press Section,
7 April 1987.

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