



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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BIA/Encounter Conference on "Europe and its regions"
Oxford, 17-19 April 1993

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Summary

1. The Conference was the first joint undertaking by the British-Irish Association and Anglo-Irish Encounter. It was conceived, funded and largely organised by the latter.
2. It attracted an attendance of over one hundred which included young politicians from Ireland, Northern Ireland and Britain as well as academics, officials, journalists and representatives of various European, regional and business interests. It was addressed on successive evenings by the Tanaiste and by the Foreign Secretary.
3. The Northern Ireland political representation included Mark Durkan (SDLP Chairman); Drew Nelson (a UUP Councillor from Banbridge who had the original idea for the conference); Ian Paisley Jr (DUP); and Phillip McGarry (Alliance Chairman). The TDs present were Derek McDowell and Pat Gallagher (Lab); Mary Wallace (FF); Gerry Reynolds and Paul Bradford (FG); and Liz O'Donnell (PD). Paddy Lane (FF MEP) also attended.
4. Because of the subject under discussion, the attendance included a wide range of representatives from Scotland, Wales and Northern England (regions which have rarely been represented before at BIA gatherings).
5. The basic objective had been to provide a forum for young politicians from political parties in Northern Ireland,

in the South and in Britain. The organizers decided that this objective would best be served by selecting a conference topic which was broad and uncontentious (i. e., non-Northern Ireland).

6. In the event, the supposedly neutral terrain of "Europe and its regions" did not prove entirely successful in stifling controversy.

After a day of debate on the importance of European regionalism and of North/South cooperation in Ireland, some Unionist representatives voiced misgivings about the political assumptions which seemed to them to underlie the calls for such cooperation. They complained about "a hidden agenda" and claimed to have been brought to the conference under "false pretences".

6. This sparked a belated confrontation between the nationalist and Unionist perspectives on North/South cooperation. The brief exchange of basic political positions had a mildly cathartic effect on a conference whose deliberate focus on a "safe" agenda had seemed increasingly artificial.
7. There were further political exchanges in the concluding session on Sunday morning. As the conference ended, Ian Paisley Jr said that he and his colleagues had found the event very worthwhile and that "seeds of friendship" had been sown for the future. The organizers were duly gratified and the conference was judged to have succeeded in its primary purpose.

Detail

8. In his speech after dinner on Friday evening, the Tanaiste addressed the major themes of the current

European debate, highlighting in particular the objective of economic and social cohesion and the importance of the regional dimension to the Maastricht project. He suggested ways in which the thinking behind the objective of a "Europe of the Regions" could contribute to progress on Northern Ireland.

9. In the latter context, he pointed out that no agreement could be found through a purely internal approach. Each of the two communities feared being locked into the role of the ultimate minority in Ireland - the nationalists in the North and the Unionists in a united Ireland. Last year's talks had established general agreement that a solution could only be found by addressing satisfactorily all the relationships involved.
10. The Tanaiste suggested that agreed structures could be found, if at all, only in some context which somehow transcended the stark alternatives of two rival positions. The EC offered a model of how conflict could be resolved through a creative acceptance of diversity. It also offered a new framework free of the connotations of victory or defeat for either side and carrying no liabilities from the past.
11. The Tanaiste's address was well-received and was the subject of much favourable comment among participants afterwards. SDLP representatives welcomed his emphasis on the European dimension to political progress and his ruling-out of a purely internal settlement. Others welcomed his acceptance of the need for "give-and-take" between all sides in future talks. Graham Archer (FCO) reacted very positively to the address.
12. On a day which had also seen the DUP boycott the Taoiseach in Derry, the four DUP participants staged a

walk-out from the dinner in advance of the Tanaiste's speech. The contradiction between this stunt and Ian Paisley Jr's polite exchanges with the Tanaiste both before and after the dinner was the subject of much bemused comment among conference participants.

13. Plenary sessions on Saturday, interspersed with working group discussions, dealt respectively with the issues of European regionalism, the Single Market and the sharing of resources in Europe.
14. The following points of interest arose in the debate on European regionalism.
15. Juliet Lodge, a professor of European politics at Hull, observed that, while in some countries (e.g., Germany and Spain) regions enjoyed substantial powers, in others national Governments merely paid lip service to them.

She emphasized the importance of national Governments lobbying in Brussels on behalf of their regions and of the regions themselves also lobbying actively, either individually or in conjunction with other regions with similar concerns. She noted the success of the German Government in securing generous Community funding for the economic development of the former East German "Lander".

Professor Lodge underlined the need for democratic accountability at the regional level. This would have to be ensured through elected assemblies, as it would not be provided by the fairly limited "Committee of the Regions" envisaged under the Maastricht Treaty.

She predicted that in post-Maastricht Europe the island of Ireland would be treated effectively as a single unit (with a distinction no longer being made between the

interests of North and South). "Bold thinking" would be needed to ensure the necessary democratic accountability.

16. The head of North Rhine Westphalia's representative office in Brussels provided an interesting account of his office's activities (though some queried the relevance to regionalist concerns in Ireland and Britain of a "region" comprising 17 million inhabitants).

Highlighting the special position of Germany's regions under the Federal Constitution, he mentioned that the practice in the case of North Rhine Westphalia was for a Minister representing that "Land" to attend Council meetings along with the relevant Federal Minister (as an observer without the right to intervene) whenever issues of particular concern to North Rhine Westphalia were on the agenda.

17. Other participants noted that Ministers from the Scottish Office frequently attended Council meetings as part of the UK delegation if subjects of particular interest to them were being discussed.
18. George Quigley (Chairman of Ulster Bank) remarked that the case for regionalism was now well-established in Europe. People were increasingly going for a "bottom-up" approach to economic planning (rather than "top-down"). He looked forward to regionalism being put into effect on the island of Ireland and to both parts of Ireland "reaching out" to other regions in Europe. Europe must be brought to view Ireland as a single economic area in the interests of economic growth in both parts.
19. Several speakers accused the British Government of indifference towards regionalism and observed a

contradiction between the continuing centralist attitudes in Westminster and Whitehall and London's status as one of the most depressed regions in the country.

One speaker commented that the "restlessness" experienced in Northern Ireland about direct rule from London was shared in many other parts of the United Kingdom. Another predicted that, with an increasing number of decisions being taken at regional level, the role of national Parliaments in Europe would decline over the coming years.

20. Michael Parker (General Secretary of the Progressive Democrats) alleged a centralist prejudice on the part of the Irish Government, expressed in opposition to an increase in powers for local government. Liz O'Donnell TD claimed that the Department of Finance had turned down a request by Dublin City Council for funding to establish a representative office in Brussels. A junior Fianna Fail member claimed that, notwithstanding current regional consultations, the regional perspective would receive scant attention in the Development Plan for 1994-97 now in preparation.
21. Graham Archer indicated that the 24 UK members of the "Committee of the Regions" would all be elected representatives. Mark Durkan said the SDLP's understanding was that there would be two from Northern Ireland; Archer replied that the question of whether there would be two or three remained to be decided.
22. It was noted that the proposed Committee had been greeted with a distinct lack of enthusiasm by the European Parliament, which considered that it already reflected regional interests adequately and which was in any event unwilling to see other institutions gain a significant

budget or powers if these were being denied to the Parliament.

23. Garret FitzGerald commented that the commonality of interests between North and South, and the difference between both and the UK's interests, were such that it would be clearly to Northern Ireland's advantage if it could choose in appropriate instances to have its interests represented in Brussels by the Irish Government rather than by the British Government.

He foresaw British Government opposition to this, and believed that there might also be some reluctance in Dublin to share "our bit of sovereignty" with Northern Ireland, but he felt that this was the direction in which matters could well develop in the longer term.

24. Alliance and Unionist reactions to this were cautious.

Phillip McGarry (Alliance) suggested that, if the right political structures were put in place, there could be extensive "functional cooperation" between North and South in the European context.

Ian Paisley Jr. accepted that regionalism was in itself an attractive concept if one could leave aside issues of sovereignty. However, present realities in Northern Ireland had to be recognized. He favoured Northern Ireland's interests being represented directly in Brussels via the participation of NIO Ministers in the UK Government delegation to Council meetings. "Why bring in other political situations which will simply end up alienating people, whether we like it or not?".

He also highlighted the problem of additionality and said that the British Exchequer's policy of withholding

funding which Northern Ireland badly needed was causing considerable hostility towards Europe in Northern Ireland.

25. Garret FitzGerald remarked that, as each member State had only one vote in the Council and it could be assumed that Britain's national interest would always prevail, the presence of NIO representatives would in itself be insufficient to protect Northern Ireland's interests. The Irish Government, on the other hand, had consistently used its vote and its influence in ways which benefited Northern Ireland (e.g., the securing of a third EP seat there).

He agreed that something should be done to tackle the problem of additionality. He hoped that every effort would be made by both Governments to maximise the benefits available from Europe for Northern Ireland, in particular by having Northern Ireland brought within the ambit of the Cohesion Fund.

26. Mark Durkan complained that, when the issue of Northern Ireland's representation in Europe had arisen during Strand One of last year's talks, the British Government had opposed any special arrangements for Northern Ireland (such as those outlined in the case of North Rhine Westphalia).

Durkan was also critical of the British Government (and, to a lesser extent, of the Irish Government) in relation to the degree of regional consultation carried out during the last round of INTERREG negotiations.

27. Garret FitzGerald suggested that improved access to Brussels for European regions was, in fact, easing (rather than, as originally feared, accentuating)

tensions within the countries concerned.

Mary Holland, on the other hand, considered the case for regionalism to be seriously impaired by the present situation in ex-Yugoslavia.

28. Criticising the lack of a coherent and European regional policy to date (as distinct from funding), Mark Durkan observed drily that "regional policy is an idea whose Fund has come".
29. Charles Whelan (Irish Chairman of Encounter) noted the scope for Irish/Welsh cooperation in relation to the Channel Tunnel and mentioned that the Tanaiste had an interest in this. A Plaid Cymru representative urged the British Government to pursue this question more actively with the Irish Government than it had been doing. Graham Archer said that the British Government favoured carrying out joint studies with the Irish Government on the totality of transport needs between these islands and the European mainland.
30. There was an extensive debate on the Single Market, which also addressed the latter's implications for increased trade and business cooperation between North and South in Ireland. The message conveyed strongly by a number of participants was that there was scope for Irish business interests of all sizes, North and South, to influence decisions in their favour through lobbying in Brussels.

Paddy Jordan of IBEC endorsed the Tanaiste's reflection on how little use was being made by Northern and Southern manufacturers of the market on their respective doorsteps. Desmond Rea (Professor of Business Studies at NUU) remarked that Unionist businessmen would have to accept that the market in future would be the whole

island of Ireland, not just Northern Ireland.

31. The reverberation of this theme in various ways during the conference caused some Unionist representatives to grumble that there was a "hidden agenda" beneath the ostensible subject for discussion. They complained about the use of phrases like "a single economic unit" or "the economic unity of Ireland". They claimed that the political assumptions on which this discussion seemed to be based amounted to placing them "on the slippery slope to a united Ireland" and, accordingly, that they had been brought along to the conference on "false pretences".
32. The issue came to a head in a plenary session on Saturday afternoon.

Drew Nelson (UUP) accepted that North/South economic cooperation would bring significant benefits to both economies but discounted any need for particular structures to facilitate it. When John Fee of the SDLP reacted by remarking that such cooperation would indeed require a "political face" (in the interest of ensuring democratic answerability for public-sector policies and measures), Nelson challenged this sharply.

Mark Durkan and other SDLP representatives in turn endorsed the need for political structures which would enable North/South cooperation to be managed in the interests both of practical efficiency and of political accountability.

This exchange not only brought into the open the tensions between the nationalist and Unionist approaches to North/South economic cooperation but also ensured that the broad political differences between the Northern Ireland parties surfaced in the debate for the first

time.

33. In his after-dinner address on Saturday evening (see annexed script), the Foreign Secretary laid strong emphasis on the continuing role of sovereign states, while acknowledging that "we are untidy cartographers with imperfect maps".

On subsidiarity, he recalled "an Irish Minister" saying during the pre-Maastricht negotiations that decisions must be taken at the level where they can be most effective - "decentralized where possible, centralized where necessary". Neither Dublin nor London, he continued, wanted a European superstate. "The nation State is our unit". From that starting point, they could work effectively together as two countries and together as a Community. At the same time, they could embrace diversity, whether in regions or in communities.

In an addition to his script, the Foreign Secretary recalled the somewhat unsatisfactory circumstances of the pre-Maastricht negotiations and underlined the need for Britain and Ireland to consult together and with the other member States on "post-1996".

On Northern Ireland, he began by saying that it was important to "seize any wind which can fill our sails" and that, in his view, there was such a wind now. Sticking closely to his script, he recalled last year's talks and said that "in new talks the Republic of Ireland has a crucial role, not as a rival of sovereignty but as a partner in relationships between the two Governments and within the island of Ireland, relationships based on trust and mutual respect". These needed to be further developed if there was to be long-term political stability in Ireland, an end to political violence and a

return to the decencies of normal democratic life. "The Republic has an entirely legitimate interest in this".

The Foreign Secretary went on to note the Irish Government's willingness to initiate and incorporate constitutional change in the context of an overall settlement and to remark that "there is tough work ahead for all of us". In an addition to his script, he said it was very important that "friends and well-wishers in other parts of the world should know that too".

He observed that, while it was simple to "stay in the trenches" and avoid imaginative moves, "trench warfare was the most murderous of all forms of warfare and settled little". The right lessons must be drawn from history and "Patrick Mayhew and Dick Spring have shown us the right path".

34. Douglas Hurd's speech was well-received. In private conversation afterwards, some participants concluded that the British Government may have hopes of recruiting Irish support for its positions in the current Maastricht debate (e.g., in relation to ERM); and that the Foreign Secretary's forthcoming visit to Dublin may also be relevant in this connection.

In conversation with NIO and FCO contacts, I welcomed the Northern Ireland content in broad terms but signalled some reservations about the phrase "not as a rival for sovereignty". (This phrase was previously used in a controversial speech which the Foreign Secretary delivered on Northern Ireland at a Conservative Party Conference in October 1991).

Graham Archer indicated that, in keeping with normal practice, the speech had been very largely drafted by the

Foreign Secretary himself.

35. In the concluding session on Sunday morning, Drew Nelson commented that European affairs provided a "neutral meeting-point" for the two traditions from Northern Ireland and that the conference had been very useful.
36. Mark Durkan underlined the need for both nationalist and Unionist sensitivities to be respected. If nationalists were being asked to accept some arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland, Unionists would have to accept some North/South arrangements.

On Unionist suspicions about a "hidden agenda", Durkan observed that nationalist suspicions might equally be aroused by the agenda underlying the description of Northern Ireland as a region of the UK. Europe was about a "convergence of allegiance and of purpose" between both communities. It allowed each to "walk away from inherited orthodoxies". It should help each to find new language which would redefine their identity in terms "not of the place belonging to me but of me belonging to the place".

37. Ian Paisley Jr said that the conference had been very useful, less for the discussion of European regionalism than because of the "seeds of friendship" sown with other participants from different traditions. He and his DUP colleagues would not, however, "give up on certain viewpoints which we hold dearly".

He agreed with Durkan that it was important for people from Northern Ireland to see themselves as more than Irish or British. However, the question of "ownership" was a vital part of his own identity.

38. In his winding-up remarks, Sir David Goodall (British Chairman of Encounter) commented that it would be wrong if Europe seemed to be appropriated by one side or the other in the Northern Ireland conflict. Northern Ireland as a whole would lose out from such a development. He felt that the conference had served to demonstrate that Europe provided a valuable framework within which all the British and Irish identities could be developed in the future.

David Donoghue

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20 April 1993