



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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## Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference

London, 18th July 1996

### OVERVIEW NOTE

#### Arrangements

1. The Irish delegation is to depart Baldonnel at 2.00pm and arrive at Northolt airport at 3.00pm. The Conference will take place at the Old Admiralty Buildings, where the Irish delegation will arrive at 3.30pm. Following a photo call, the Tánaiste and Secretary of State may wish for a brief tete-a-tete. The restricted security session will begin at 3.50pm, to be followed at 4.20pm by the plenary session. The Conference is scheduled to end at 6.00pm, following which the Irish, and then the British, sides will give their respective press conferences. The Irish delegation will depart for Northolt airport at 6.30pm, where the Government jet is due to leave for Baldonnel at approximately 7.15pm.

#### Overview

2. There will be a strong public focus on the Conference as a test of the state of Anglo-Irish relations in the wake of the Drumcree debacle. The strong attacks on British policy in that regard have produced a reflex of hostility and self-defence directed towards us, as is illustrated in the aggressive "spin" which they put on their agreement to call the Conference.
3. At the same time they are deeply conscious that a sustained public confrontation with the Irish Government is costly for them in presentational terms, and dangerous in terms of management of the problem. They are therefore likely to wish to present the Conference as putting matters back on

the rails. The danger is perhaps that they would seek to do so on facile terms, consistent with their apparent inability to understand the enormous question mark which the u-turn at Drumcree has placed over their stewardship and moral authority in the eyes of the entire nationalist (and Catholic) community.

4. There are some indications that the British may want to channel the debate into side issues (i.e. was the Chief Constable acting under political influence or not) to avoid the embarrassing central questions. The Irish side should keep the focus firmly on the overall picture: fundamental long-term damage has been done to the credibility of a strategy of an accommodation based on parity of esteem and to the perception and acceptability of the RUC. Fundamental questions about the tribal basis and the reformability of Northern Ireland have suddenly been brought to the forefront again. The absence of any moral, or even political compass, on the part of the British Government in relation to these developments has created a vacuum where there should be authority. They have allowed themselves to be aligned with the sectarian agenda espoused by Mr. Trimble in a way which may radicalise a whole new generation.
5. The detail of who is to blame for this situation must be left to the historians. Even on purely operational criteria, however, the failure of the RUC in terms of anticipating Orange reactions and making the necessary contingency plans to deal with them is staggering. On purely political criteria the failure of either the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State to speak out firmly on Orange law breaking and intimidation has sent its own unmistakable message. The Conference should not purport to gloss over these realities. Any pretence on our side that it could do so would simply cancel out the steadying influence of the strong stance taken by the Government over the

past two weeks. We should rather present the Conference as the first step in seeking to repair the damage which has been done - damage whose scope remains very grave.

6. There have been strong and documented representations about RUC demeanour in the wake of the Drumcree "U-turn", which, it is overwhelmingly agreed, was in the most glaring contrast to the indulgent treatment of Orange law-breakers before that. The plastic bullets issue is particularly serious. From a combination of British figures and media reports, it would appear that a minimum of 5,340 were fired in the 3 days after the Garvaghy Road march, compared to 662 in the 4 days of the stand-off. The use of plastic bullets has extensively violated rules as to aiming only at the lower body and from more than 20 metres. The Irish side will want to make views known privately and publicly on this.

### Irish Presentation

7. Irish presentation after the Conference might be on the following lines:
- Both sides are fully aware of the grave implications of what happened (or, at a minimum, the British Government were left in no doubt as to our views).
  - Our discussions were less concerned with apportioning blame than with beginning a process to repair the damage which has been done.
  - We see the need for urgent action on a number of fronts:
  - We need to restore the primacy of the political process.

- This must be done both in relation to intergovernmental cooperation, which remains the enabling condition for progress, and is more vital than ever in times of crisis.
- We must also find a way of instilling relevance, momentum and substance into the negotiating process in Castle Buildings.
- The parades issue has fully demonstrated its capacity to plunge Northern Ireland back into the abyss. It is vital now that a fresh and better way be found to deal with it, particularly in view of flash-points for the rest of the season.
- We expressed our strongest concern about the demeanour of the security forces, and particularly the reckless use of plastic baton rounds which have caused both serious injuries and increased tension.
- Violence can have no part to play in the political process and both Governments are determined that their security cooperation should counter in the most effective possible way the threat of violence from any source.

Anglo-Irish Division  
Department of Foreign Affairs  
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