

NORTHERN IRELAND OVERSEAS INFORMATION COMMITTEE (NIOIC)  
MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 21 JUNE 1988



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Mr Wood (L&B)

Mr Templeton

Mr Hewitt

Mr R Wilson, Cent Sec

Mr J McConnell, PAB

Mr R Minnis, DED

Mr I Devitt, DFP

Mr M Bohill, IDB

Mr S Johnston, DED

Ms L Jackson

Mr Cowper-Coles, Washington

Mrs Aitken, RID, FCO

Mr S Brown, Information Dept, FCO

Ms J McIver, BIS New York

International Section  
SIL

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NORTHERN IRELAND OVERSEAS INFORMATION COMMITTEE, 21 JUNE 1988

Present:

Dr Mawhinney, NIO (Chairman)  
Mr Spence, Central Secretariat  
Mr Bell, NIO  
Mr Wilson, Central Secretariat  
Mr Minnis, DED  
Mr Devitt, DFP  
Mr J McConnell, NIO  
Mr Bohill, IDB  
Mr Templeton, NI Information Service  
Mr Leach, NIO  
Mr Johnston, DED  
Miss Earnshaw, PS/Dr Mawhinney  
Ms Jackson, NI Information Service  
Mr Bone, NIO  
Mr Porter, NIO  
Miss Pestell, FCO  
Mr Muir, Information Department, FCO  
Mrs Hatcher, Information Department, FCO  
Mr Paddington, Information Department, FCO  
Mr Dew, RID, FCO  
Mrs Aitken, RID, FCO  
Mr Davies, RID, FCO  
Mr Cowper-Coles, Washington

1. Dr Mawhinney welcomed the meeting and took the minutes of the 1987 meeting as an accurate record. He thanked all who had contributed to the information effort and asked that his thanks be conveyed to colleagues. The papers were helpful; he asked the persons concerned to speak briefly on them before he attempted to draw the threads together.

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Item I: US Information Policy

2. Mr Cowper-Coles spoke to the Washington paper (NIOIC(88)1). He stressed that the massive impact in the US of the Milltown Cemetery and the Andersontown Road attacks had overshadowed more positive developments such as progress under the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Educating Americans in the realities of Northern Ireland remained difficult. He outlined the resources available for information work in the US, including Mr Henderson's redeployment from BIS New York to Washington in September. The Ambassador, senior staff in Washington, BIS New York and staff at the Consulates-General all devoted an appreciable proportion of their time to Northern Ireland affairs. The size and fragmented nature of the US market was a problem, especially in countering the MacBride campaign. This had prompted the decision to hire professional lobbyists whose particular skills could not be underestimated. The "iceberg watch" list produced by SIL and RID also gave a useful warning of potential difficulties: early warning of sensitive developments remained most important. Ministers' natural concern for secrecy sometimes seemed to inhibit the flow of information to the Embassy. Recent events like the Kelly report on the RUC and the Gibraltar incident emphasised the need for rapid defensive briefing. US public opinion had hoisted in the SDLP view on "harassment" by the security forces. Other problem areas for the future were the repatriation of prisoners from the mainland, SOSP cases and PBRs. It was however encouraging that Dukakis had welcomed the Fair Employment White Paper. The publicity for this had been handled well, as had the deployment of the 3rd Brigade HQ in the border area. There was a problem about the length of time it took for telegrams to be distributed in Belfast and there was also a need for more effective, direct, secure communications between Northern Ireland departments, especially DED, and Washington.

3. Mr Minnis spoke to the paper on MacBride (NIOIC(88)2). This represented a stock-taking of 7 months use of professional lobbyists. They were major contributors to the successes and partial successes achieved. He was however concerned about the

possibility of Federal legislation on MacBride. In general US companies potentially affected by MacBride were keeping their heads down. With the FCO and the NIO, DED needed to review how things were handled but at this mid-way stage they were broadly satisfied.

4. Mr Templeton spoke to the paper on lecture tours in the US (NIOIC(88)3). The question was how to organise these and the resources needed. The role of the English Speaking Union and, at the suggestion of BIS New York, the Council on Foreign Relations and the World Affairs Council had been discussed. There was a good lecture circuit in the US but NIIS wanted to take the view of colleagues on what to do.

5. Mr Devitt introduced the paper on the International Fund (NIOIC(88)4). The Board had been uncertain whether to treat the Fund as short term or long term and reluctant to build up its profile until sure of its future. The Embassy had been helpful in countering the campaign to discredit the Fund and in building up support for it. Now that there was the prospect of an EC contribution together with the third tranche of United States money with possible additional US contributions the Board was ready to consider a change of strategy and to adopt a higher profile for the Fund.

6. Mr Muir introduced the paper on the interface between US Posts, the FCO and the NIO (NIOIC(88)5). The informal liaison committee/ working group of the FCO, NIO and MOD looked at Northern Ireland issues, and checked the supply of information material. The group had worked well together and used the "iceberg watch" list. Since its inception 18 Guidance telegrams, 12 Verbatims and 10 Grey Bands had been issued. Mr Leach explained the lines of communication within the NIO, and with the FCO and US Posts.

7. Mr Bohill spoke to the paper on Burson Marsteller (NIOIC(88)9). The US Senior Director of IDB, John Ritchie, was responsible for this PR operation and wanted best value for money. The settling-in period had given way to a sound action

programme. There had been a major review in February and a second review would take place in September. The priority was to increase the significance and effectiveness of the programme.

8. Opening general discussion on this item, Dr Mawhinney explored the reference to 'ministerial secrecy'. Mr Cowper-Coles explained that the Embassy often first heard about NI political developments from contacts on the Hill. More background information would make the Embassy appear more credible in Washington eyes. It would be helpful to have eg blind copies of the records of political conversations Mr King was having. Mr Leach said that SIL was alert to the need to copy papers to Washington on an ad hoc basis for background information. ACTION: Dr Mawhinney said this was a valid consumer request which needed a response. He would consider further. Divisions should continue to bear in mind the possibility of copying material to US posts. Mr McConnell replied that there was not much political material about. Miss Pestell observed that it would help if we in London knew about what was said on the Hill. ACTION: Dr Mawhinney asked Mr Cowper-Coles to see that this happened. Mr Dew said there was a gap between US speculation and hard news when a Guidance was issued. Mr Muir commented that this issue was best handled outside the liaison committee.

9. On the International Fund, Dr Mawhinney pointed to the contrast between Mr Brett's views, as Chairman, of the Fund's activities and those of Congressman Kennedy, who - like other Irish American politicians - had said he was concerned at lack of progress. Mr Devitt agreed that there was a mismatch of perceptions here, and Mr Cowper-Coles added that it was a serious problem which at one stage could have threatened the third US contribution to the Fund. Now that the Fund's rate of spending had increased, the problem had to some extent declined. But, as Mr Spence explained, difficulties would remain since there was an inevitable time-lag between the Fund's receipt of money and that money's bearing fruit in the shape of actual projects on the ground. Dr Mawhinney asked whether there was a

briefing paper on this problem. Mr Cowper-Coles replied that they had written letters to the Hill. Mr Dew said a briefing paper had been written in April but it was difficult to counter gibes that the Fund was biased. If the Irish Government came out strongly, this would carry more weight than HMG. It would be better to present the fund as having a beginning, middle and end rather than existing at the whim of Congress. ACTION: Dr Mawhinney said he would need to explore the issue with Mr King outside of NIOIC. He also enquired whether this could be looked at in the liaison committee; Mr Muir replied that the liaison committee only looked to a month ahead. Mr Leach observed that the Fund was not fully integrated into the Government machine (inevitably, because it was jealous of its independence) but this did not mean that the Government could not offer views on how it presented its activities. ACTION: Dr Mawhinney asked Mr Leach to consider this issue with the Fund secretariat and to report back. Mr Spence said that the Fund would be reviewed at the next meeting of the IGC. It would be important to get the Irish to make a public commitment to the impartiality of the IFI Board. Mr Leach speculated whether a glossy brochure or a Grey Band would be preferable as a briefing paper. Mr Cowper-Coles replied that they needed various means, letters, briefing papers etc to tackle different audiences.

10. Dr Mawhinney asked what had happened about secure communications with NI Departments in Belfast. Mr Wilson replied that Belfast was now in the regular FCO net, although telegram distribution in Belfast remained a problem. Mr Johnston suggested the use of fax machines. Mr Dew said that a protected fax system had been looked at but according to expert advice it was not suitable for classified material over long distance. It was suggested that a system to protect privacy was all that was needed. ACTION: Dr Mawhinney said a working system was needed and asked Mr Spence to consult with the relevant departments and report on the feasibility of establishing the necessary level of speedy and secure communications between Washington and relevant NI Departments.

11. On interface, Dr Mawhinney asked what happened to the information material sent to BIS New York for the rest of the US. Mr Muir pointed out that Grey Bands, and Guidances automatically went to BIS and Washington. BIS sifted all information material sent to US and passed what was needed onto the Consulates General by telephone and computer links. Dr Mawhinney asked whether this worked well in practice and who would second guess London's decisions as to what Posts needed. Mr Cowper-Coles said that the Executive Director, Deputy Director and Ms McIver of BIS would decide. There was a need to reduce the flow of paper. ACTION: Dr Mawhinney asked Mr Cowper-Coles to find out which material actioned by the monthly Liaison Committee and sent to BIS got no further and why.

12. Dr Mawhinney asked about the role of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board. Ms Jackson replied that she had tried to make links with the Board but that the Bord Failte kept her better informed. Mr Templeton said there had been a meeting of the NIO, IDB and British Council about the exchange of information and who does what. ACTION: Dr Mawhinney asked Mr Spence to report on what efforts NITB made to link up with Posts in the US.

13. Dr Mawhinney expressed interest in the paper on Burson Marsteller. Mr Cowper-Coles said that all the resources put in by HMG needed to be looked at in terms of cost benefit. He compared the £130,000 allocated to lobby against MacBride, and £500,000 for purposes other than MacBride with the £1 million received by Burson Marsteller. There were legitimate questions about the allocation of resources. Burson Marsteller had produced few obvious results to date. Mr Dew also expressed surprise that this allocation of resources had not been linked to other Government activities. Mr Cowper-Coles said there was pressure on the US travel budget. Dr Mawhinney took note of what had been said.

14. Dr Mawhinney asked whether officials were examining the potential for new MacBride-type campaigns, on other subjects, in the United States. Examples of such issues might be

repatriation of NI prisoners from mainland prisons, security force "harassment", and baton rounds. What thought was being given to our response to such campaigns, should they occur? On the specific issues, Mr Leach commented that the lines on prisoners and harassment were regularly reviewed since they were favourite topics with the Irish-American lobby, and Mrs Hatcher added that there was a 'Points at Issue' paper on plastic baton rounds. So the lines of defence were well rehearsed. In more general terms, the meeting considered the possibility of stimulating visits to Northern Ireland as one way of countering MacBride and any future such campaigns. These could be a two-edged sword - Mr McConnell pointed to the Congressman Kennedy visit, which had raised the media profile of the harassment issue in a way which did HMG less than justice. As Mr Leach pointed out, visitors to Northern Ireland come for their own purposes, which do not always coincide with HMG's.

15. Ms Jackson expressed appreciation for the work done by Ms McIver in keeping her informed. Dr Mawhinney asked whether there was need for a second such person. Mr Cowper-Coles paid tribute to her information skills and effective lobbying in New York but said he would need to consult Mr Cornish. An Ulster accent could be important for media work but was not necessary for work on the Hill. Dr Mawhinney asked how information material was supplied to our supporters in the US. On what basis was information disseminated to opinion formers and were lists kept up-to-date? The American Ireland Fund had 10,000 possible donors listed. Mr Cowper-Coles replied that there was a media list and a second list of some 200 key people interested in Northern Ireland. ACTION: Dr Mawhinney asked Mr Cowper-Coles whether there were lists of private citizens and, if so, the numbers involved and whether the lists were updated. Could he see copies? Returns were needed from Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Washington and New York. Mr Cowper-Coles undertook to provide the material, but indicated that their resources were fully stretched. They would need to look at existing work if new tasks were taken on.

16. Dr Mawhinney raised the question of community action in Northern Ireland in the light of the Enniskillen atrocity and asked about the US response to the idea of integrated education and the Enniskillen bursaries. Mr Cowper-Coles replied that there was considerable interest in the US in community relations and on education reform especially relating to areas in Belfast and Londonderry. There was a potentially big market for visits targetted at these areas. Action: Dr Mawhinney asked Mr Spence to investigate and report how such visits could be taken forward. On lecture tours in the US Mr Cowper-Coles said he was doubtful whether they were worthwhile. Audiences for such events in the past had been small.

Item II: Contacts between NI Information Service and Foreign Correspondents

17. Introducing NIOIC(88)6, Mr Templeton said that there had been interest in Northern Ireland, but the Anglo-Irish Agreement last year had been overshadowed by the impact of recent events including Stalker/Sampson. Efforts to interest US correspondents in less controversial subjects had not been too successful. They focussed only on spectacular events and had no interest in generalities. General interest visits to Belfast had not worked. Ms Jackson supported this view saying US correspondents visited Northern Ireland off their own bat. Mr Muir agreed that it was difficult to attract US correspondents, who preferred to operate independently, but the US Correspondents Association in London provided a good area of contact. Dr Mawhinney asked whether there had been any results from the many briefings he had given to correspondents. Mr Muir replied that overseas Posts were asked to report reactions from official visitors. ACTION: Dr Mawhinney asked that Information Officers overseas should make available to Ministers the reactions of foreign journalists to the Ministerial briefings they had received in Northern Ireland, where these resulted in published articles.

Item III: Visits Policy

18. Speaking to NIOIC(88)7, Mr Wilson said that visits to Northern Ireland promoted goodwill. Information was needed on what interested visitors in order to ensure that a quality programme could be provided. More selectivity was needed, eg picking persons in key committees. Many visitors were self-selected and overseas Posts might with advantage be more pro-active in seeking out future visitors. Mr Cowper-Coles replied that the US was a worthwhile market for visitors but Americans were extremely suspicious of official HMG sponsorship. He would ask Mr Henderson to focus on this. Dr Mawhinney asked whether offering a visit to for Northern Ireland as part of a UK wide programme would be effective. We needed to be more active in addressing the personal and leisure interests of individuals and accommodate them in programmes - "whole person visits". ACTION: Dr Mawhinney said that Northern Ireland should if possible be considered as an integral part of any official visit to the UK or Europe and asked Mr Spence to report on the scope for taking this and the concept of "whole person" visits forward.

19. Mr Leach spoke about official visits from Northern Ireland and made a broad distinction between two types; low profile visits with a fairly defined purpose, eg to attract inward investment; and higher profile visits designed to promulgate the Government's message on Northern Ireland much more widely. There was a need for credible, and preferably non-official, visitors to combat the MacBride campaign. Such visitors might also undertake wider lobbying work in the US. ACTION: Mr Cowper-Coles said Mr Henderson would investigate. Mr Dew said that all visits could be useful. Mr Cowper-Coles pointed out the difficulties of the US market. Americans had little idea of who was who. Dr Mawhinney asked whether Washington received advance information of visits by MPs. Would it be useful to brief them? Mr Cowper-Coles said sometimes there was a lack of warning but briefings had taken place eg Mr Patten on Irish issues on the Hill. Dr Mawhinney asked whether there was need for a mechanism. ACTION: Mr Cowper-Coles replied that he

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would speak to Mr Henderson and try to set something up. It should be noted that John Hume was very influential in the US.

Visit to US

20. Dr Mawhinney said he hoped to visit the US in September. He looked forward to seeing Mr Cowper-Coles again then.

Next Meeting

21. Dr Mawhinney expressed thanks for a useful meeting. NIOIC should try to meet again inside 12 months; he suggested March 1989.

Information Department

August 1988

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