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Irish Association Conference
Maynooth 26-28 September 1986

I attended two sessions of the Irish Association Conference. The theme was to be media views of Northern Ireland, but in fact every speaker gave his own lecture. The majority of the attendance was from Northern Ireland, ranging from nationalist to very moderate unionists.

Former Ambassador Bill Shannon
U.S. Funds

The US Government provision of \$50m should be seen as a token of goodwill on the part of the American people and as a contrast to the Noraid money. While it is much less than the Mini Marshall plan first envisaged by the Carter administration it nevertheless will play a useful role in encouraging positive development in Northern Ireland.

Official US Attitude to Northern Ireland

The U.S. State Department was initially quite hostile to the Northern Ireland issue and saw it as a purely U.K. domestic issue. B. Devlin's radicalism did not help persuade the U.S. to change its mind, but from the middle of the 1970s, attitude did begin to change as the '4 Horsemen' and the Irish Government's message began to sink home. Following the idea of the Mini-Marshall plan, American Presidents began taking an interest and asking British Prime Ministers what they were doing on Northern Ireland. Ambassador Shannon believes that the Atkins proposals of October 1979 were timed to give the British P.M. something to refer to when the issue came up during a December 1979 visit to Washington.

U.S. Public View

In the U.S. there is no continuous interest in Northern Ireland in the U.S. media and so it tends to be reported as a disconnected series of spectacular security events. In so far as there is any further understanding of the situation, it is the nationalist view, as expressed by J. Hume and the Irish Government. Americans tend to feel that power-sharing is required as part of the solution and they do not understand the Unionist position (which is in any event not publicised in the U.S.) since, in any power-sharing arrangement the Unionists would have a substantial majority of posts. The view of the Agreement is that what is good enough for the Irish Government, S.D.L.P. and Alliance parties is good enough for the U.S.

Noraid

The number of Americans who support Noraid is now very small, perhaps 20,000 who are hard core IRA/Sinn Fein supporters and not amenable to the efforts of the Irish Government or Embassy to persuade them not to fund the I.R.A. The \$150,000 p.a. which Noraid now collects should be seen against the \$1m p.a. collected in 1972 and 1973. The level of Noraid funding reflects events in Northern Ireland and of course rose somewhat in with the hunger strikes but has fallen again since.

The Agreement and Development

A vital part of the Agreement is that the U.K. Government be resolute and the Irish Government discreet. If either side were not, the balance would be upset and the British would find Dublin making loud complaints (as it did over Portadown) or Dublin would find the British unwilling to make progress. However this basic balance is well understood.

Mr. Shannon said the Unionists should seek to negotiate now while they still had time because neither Government will abandon the Agreement. He could see a situation developing when the British Government would hand over insoluble security problems to Ireland such as South Armagh.

Campaign for Equal Citizenship

Mr. Boyd Black (lecturer in QUB and candidate for Fulham) gave a short talk on the disenfranchisement of the Northern Ireland electorate, rather similar to other talks by members of the Campaign for Equal Citizenship. He said that it was the fastest growing movement in Northern Ireland. It was disingenuous of Hume to say that the context of the Northern Ireland problem should be widened as in the Anglo-Irish Agreement to include all of Ireland, while Northern Ireland was ghettoised by Westminster parties. The campaign is neither for nor against the agreement per se: it is quite possible to want to vote for a British party and support the Agreement.

However, in questions afterward, he said that the important issue is not unionists coming to terms with Ireland, but rather nationalists coming to terms with the U.K.: 50% of the Catholic community were not nationalist already, implying the nationalists constituted a very small minority. M. Wallace asked him to comment on the fact that the Unionist party had left the Conservatives. While not denying this, Mr. Black concentrated on the N.I.L.P., saying that in 1972 Mr. Callaghan invited them to join the British Labour Party, but then backed off because of pressure from Dublin and particularly from the Irish Labour party. Mr. Black also noted that the Liberal party had in the past organised in Northern Ireland, Mrs. Napier (mother of O. Napier) was at the meeting and referred to this. Mr. Black said the SPD took some Northern Ireland members when first established, probably by mistake, and now did not organise or let them run candidates.

Privately, Mr. Black said that he favoured a Regional Council for N.I., with executive but no legislative powers. He offered same pamphlets for sale including the attached.

Mr. D. McKitterick gave a very interesting description of the Unionist psyche.

Unionism in Westminster

In 1981, in Westminster, nationalists and nationalism's names were mud and Unionists had every opportunity to make their case. They threw their advantage away, Mr. Molyneaux relying on Mr. Powell for influence. This gave Unionists some entrée to the British P.M., but Mr. Powell's associates on the right upset many other potential supporters in the British Parliament. Mr. Molyneaux himself was the invisible man despite leading a party of 12 members. On the other hand Paisley was only too visible and his style was widely distrusted and disliked. At the same time, the Irish Government and Embassy were using considerable political skills to win support for their point of view. It is not the case that the OUP/DUP lacked political skills - they just wasted them on fighting with each other and still do. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was a huge psychological shock and the sense of betrayal is still uppermost in Unionist minds.

Unionism Internationally

Looking wider than the Westminster context, Unionists see a hostile world; a world which believes the nationalists' explanation of the past, a past about which many Unionists have a guilty conscience. They never had a belief in their permanent endurance which nationalists have, rather even Craigavon saw Unionism on a temporary phenomenon. The middle

classes were never fully committed to N.I. politics and tended not to get involved. Now, haunted by the discrimination of the past they are even less willing to do so. When they go abroad they identify themselves as British (English) or Irish if necessary, but try hard to forget their past.

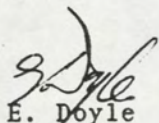
McKitterick has gone frequently to the Public Record Office to see the Cabinet papers as they are released. They reveal the operations of small, insecure men for example arguing over whether a school should not be grant aided for Catholics on the grounds that it might encourage more Catholics in an area.

The Future

Unionism is split and does not know where it wants to go or what methods to use. Different strands want integration, devolution, independence; different methods—physical force, politics are advocated. This debate in Unionism is healthy and McKitterick has believed it was necessary to encourage forward movement. However there is a danger that it may come to the wrong conclusion. The Agreement is imperfect but it is to be welcomed to the extent that it has opened this debate.

Brian Garret, in discussing the impact on Unionism of the Agreement over dinner, also made the point that Unionists had always believed that a united Ireland would happen eventually, but viewed the Anglo-Irish Agreement with at least extreme distaste. He felt that 3 Judge Courts would not change the situation radically, but it was an idea which could do little harm and was worth a try. He would also like to see a beefed up Police Complaints Procedure. However, he is not optimistic about the future. He also said that he had seen the results of a survey in West Belfast which shared no reduction in support for Sinn Fein. I said I would be interested in a copy, but I am not sure that he will supply it.

A few of the delegates including a Mr. Porter who is an Alliance party member said that they felt the Minister's speeches were too much directed at nationalists and that the unionist audience should also be remembered. They did not however have specific ideas on this.


E. Doyle

Anglo-Irish Section

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Secretary
A-I Section
A-I Secretariat
Amb. London
Box

1905m