



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/99/9

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Accession Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

(25)

~~24~~

Meeting between the Taoiseach and the British Ambassador,
Thursday, 20 February, 1997, 3.30p.m., in Taoiseach's Office.

Attendance

Taoiseach
H.E. Veronica Sutherland, British Ambassador
Walter Kirwan
Dr. Albert Jordan

The Ambassador congratulated the Taoiseach on his European of the Year award.

(N) **Restorick**

- ♦ Taoiseach conveyed his sympathy and sense of outrage at the murder by the IRA of Stephen Restorick.
- ♦ He also conveyed his appreciation of the invitation which was extended to him to attend the funeral. Unfortunately diary commitments don't permit this. However, Ambassador Barrington would represent him and he wished to convey his fullest and deepest sympathy to the family.

(44) **Bloody Sunday**

- ♦ The Taoiseach was pleased that Sir Patrick Mayhew had met the relatives of the Bloody Sunday victims.
- ♦ He was however, surprised at the phraseology which Sir Patrick used in his radio interview the following day, (though the Taoiseach had not heard the full interview).
- ♦ The Taoiseach made the point that there was a tremendous sense of hurt in the Nationalist community regarding Bloody Sunday. It was his own view that the victims should be heeded more than they had been.
- ♦ An apology would allow them to forgive and reconcile. It might be useful to seek some way to allow them and all victims of violence in Northern Ireland to be heard more than they had been.

- ♦ Mr. Kirwan referred to ideas for this presented to the Forum for Peace and reconciliation in a paper by Mr. David Bolton of Enniskillen.
- ♦ The Taoiseach made the point that even quite apart from Northern Ireland, in very many cases of legal compensation claims the primary motive was not money at all, but the psychological release of having the wrongs done to one publicly acknowledged. He said he recognised that wrong has of course been done on both sides in the North.
- ♦ The Taoiseach said that he would be meeting the relatives of Bloody Sunday victims that evening.
- ♦ The Taoiseach recalled his phone conversation with Prime Minister Major in which he undertook to let him have relevant material in this regard and where the Prime Minister was open to having closely examined any new evidence. The Taoiseach said he was pleased at the Prime Ministers undertaking.

Taoiseach's visit to Northern Ireland

- ♦ The Taoiseach reported that the plans for his visit to Fermanagh were going well.
- ♦ He commented it had been some time since his last visit to Northern Ireland and that one of the reasons for his remaining outside of the province during this period was his desire not to interpose his presence in a way which might adversely impact on progress in the multi-party talks. However he hopes now to take the opportunity to see for himself at first hand the situation on the ground - for both traditions.

Sellafield

- ♦ The Taoiseach said he wanted to convey Ireland's opposition to NIREX proposals for a rock characterisation facility near Sellafield. Reasonable and intelligent people have recently conveyed their horror about the unquestionable risks which Sellafield presents for Ireland. This is a further indication, if such were needed, of the degree of concern in Irish public opinion on this issue.

Remarks from Number 10

- The Ambassador conveyed to the Taoiseach Prime Minister John Major's good wishes. She also said that the Prime Minister wished to thank the Taoiseach for his various remarks expressing outrage at events in Northern Ireland, which had of course been noted in London.
- The Ambassador thanked the Taoiseach for his message of sympathy about Lance Bombardier Stephen Restorick and commented that she too had received several messages of sympathy in this regard.

Bloody Sunday

- The Ambassador conveyed that Bloody Sunday was indeed a tragic day.
- She commented that recent developments on this issue had been "very sad because the wrong message has now come out regarding what Sir Patrick Mayhew had said on Saturday".
- She remarked that Sir Patrick's intention was to convey three points:
 1. To accept that it was indeed a disaster which should never have happened.
 2. To express deep regret that it had happened. It had been the intention to go further in expressing sadness and regret than the Prime Minister had previously gone. This had been specifically cleared with the Prime Minister.
 3. To repeat the Prime Ministers statement in the House of Commons that new evidence would of course be looked at.
- She went on to say that however Sir Patrick had been asked a direct question on the apology and the way in which he answered this question gave the impression that the British Government were rolling back from their commitment, this was a wrong impression, she said.
- The Taoiseach said that this was helpful to know, particularly in the context of the meeting he was having this evening with the relatives of the victims of Bloody Sunday. He inquired whether this clarification could be conveyed by him at this evenings meeting. The Ambassador replied that she would liaise with London to see if she could clear this. [She subsequently did so and dictated points of clarification, cleared by the N.I.O., over the telephone to Mr. Kirwan.]

- ♦ Ambassador Sutherland said that Sir Patrick also conveyed this sense of deep regret over Bloody Sunday to John Hume.
- ♦ She made the point that an apology could perhaps open up the possibility of prosecution for some of the soldiers involved.
- ♦ The Taoiseach inquired from the Ambassador whether she felt that prosecution of the soldiers was what the relatives were seeking.
- ♦ The Ambassador replied she did not think so, but that Sinn Féin/IRA may have that as part of their agenda.

Roisín McAliskey

- (20)
- ♦ In response to the Taoiseach's raising of this matter the Ambassador said that this was being continuously monitored and that she was in frequent contact with London on the issue.

Taoiseach's visit to Co. Fermanagh

- ♦ The Ambassador told the Taoiseach that she had conveyed to officials in London that they were over reacting regarding the Taoiseach's visit to the North, She stressed that he would of course be very welcome. Her only concern was that a little bit more notice would have been useful in the context of security and that this might be borne in mind for future visits.
- ♦ The Ambassador asked whether any member of the Irish Embassy in London ever travels to Northern Ireland. The Taoiseach said he understood the question but noted that we had the Secretariat in Belfast - which the Ambassador acknowledged.
- ♦ Mr. Kirwan commented that it does not appear that the Taoiseach's visit was upsetting too many Unionists and he made the point that the Chairman of Fermanagh District Council was prepared to offer the Taoiseach an official lunch.
- ♦ On the wider issue of visits to Northern Ireland in general, including those by President Robinson, the Ambassador commented that she considered it rude, uncharitable and unchristian to prevent people visiting places.

- ♦ The Taoiseach stressed that he was not visiting Northern Ireland to make a political point (adverse to Unionists).

Sellafield

- ♦ The Ambassador noted that she has regular talks with Minister of State Stagg about NIREX.
- ♦ She said that the Minister had convinced her that underground storage was unreliable. She said that the Minister had put to her that the British Government had not fulfilled all of their requirements regarding feasibility studies required under International agreements. He also made the point that information on alternative sites or solutions should also have been made available, which was not done. If this is the case - and she seemed to accept that it might be - it should, she agreed, be brought out into the open. She said that Minister Stagg said that alternative solutions, (which would not involve digging huge holes) existed and that these concerns are logged in London. She said that when a reply was received on this matter she would copy it to Mr. Kirwan.

Northern Ireland Talks Process

- (25)
- ♦ The Taoiseach remarked that he was happy that the SDLP, UUP, and Alliance contacts had been seeking to move the process forward. But it now seemed as if a breakthrough would not occur before the Westminster election. There was a need to consider how best to get the talks process safely over the gap and to give hope that they would move forward and make progress thereafter.
 - ♦ It seemed clear that the Ulster Unionists did not wish to sit down with Sinn Féin and had been using the decommissioning issue as a hurdle. In a telephone conversation with Reg Empey, he (Taoiseach) had remarked that the SDLP might be branded a "Lundy" (traitor) if they were to make entry by Sinn Féin into the talks too difficult by allowing hurdles on decommissioning to be set up.
 - ♦ Mr. Kirwan said that we now appeared to be progressing towards a "parking situation" on the talks, with a view to parking them around about 5 March, with a possible resumption around 2 June. In this context there had been discussion in Dublin with British officials on 16 January on what is being described as a "managed set of statements". These

statements would perhaps need to hint, with due care, at other avenues which might be pursued if the talks did not start making progress.

- ♦ The Ambassador said that both Governments agreed on the need for a "soft landing" and on the probable dates. She said that regarding statements the British Governments preference would be for the Chairman to make a statement which binds everybody. She said that statements by the two Governments might be difficult, but if the Irish Government wanted this, it could be looked at.
- ♦ The Taoiseach said that what we have in mind is a co-ordinated set of statements. The object of these statements would be to convey credibly, that on resumption, the talks would have a renewed sense of urgency. It was he said, important to raise expectations to "get us across the gap". It would also be desirable to have the political oppositions (Ahern/Blair) sign up to such statements, as a way of helping to embed the process.
- ♦ Mr. Kirwan noted that there were Loyalist concerns at the need for credibility in the talks process to keep their paramilitary people on side and that they might welcome such statements to give an increased degree of expectation for resumed talks.
- ♦ The Ambassador said she would report these views to London.
- ♦ Regarding the making of such up-beat "parking" statements by Prime Minister Major, the Taoiseach recognised that there might be some difficulties regarding his relationship with Unionists. He commented however, that perhaps the best time for him to make such statements were, if he were about to part company with the Unionists, ideally two days or so before calling a general election. The Taoiseach said, he felt sure that language could be found which would be useful to both Governments. It could, he said, be as modest as a phone call with an agreed statement afterwards, but that it needed to be directed at making a public impact.
- ♦ The Ambassador commented that the Prime Minister was working on an article for the Belfast [Post ?] aimed at Sinn Féin/IRA and asking what do they think their violence will achieve.
- ♦ Taoiseach commented that perhaps included in the content of a statement such as he was mulling over, the message might be given that if the talks were not making progress soon after a resumption, the Governments

would consider making their own proposals, so as to ensure progress. The message needs to be conveyed that things needed to become more pro active. It was important to convey too that the Governments were not just sitting on their hands and that they were looking beyond the election. Timing was important however, and he recognised that Prime Minister Major would not wish to alienate the Unionists while he still needed them.

- ♦ The Ambassador said she could see the Taoiseach's arguments and would report them.
- ♦ Commenting on the Unionists, she said the impression in London is that the Unionists are disunited, weak, badly led and that the leadership does not reflect the wide range of opinion within. She said that Trimble was not capable of unifying the Unionists. It was very difficult to deal with them and that the Prime Minister often despairs of them.
- ♦ The Ambassador said that another Unionist might serve better than Trimble. The Taoiseach remarked that what is required is a "deal maker".
- ♦ On the subject of East West relations, the Ambassador noted that Mr. Kirwan, herself and Richard Clarke (of her Embassy) were in close touch.
- ♦ The Ambassador noted that in the context of a visit to the Isle of Man, the authorities there have invited President Robinson for July and the invitation to the Taoiseach of course, remains open.

The Taoiseach indicated that he hoped to take up that invitation at a future time when other commitments permitted. He thanked the Ambassador, and the meeting ended at approximately 4.30 p.m.

A. J. Jordan
210297