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<b>Reference Code:</b>	2004/15/16
<b>Title:</b>	Report of a meeting held on 8 March 1973 between Fine Gael leader Liam Cosgrave and Labour Party leader Brendan Corish, with some Irish officials, and British Prime Minister Edward Heath, Foreign Secretary Alec Douglas-Home, and some British officials, held to discuss the British government White Paper on Northern Ireland and political developments in Northern Ireland, north-south co-operation, and other matters.
<b>Creation Date(s):</b>	8 March, 1973
<b>Level of description:</b>	Item
<b>Extent and medium:</b>	12 pages
<b>Creator(s):</b>	Department of Foreign Affairs
<b>Access Conditions:</b>	Open
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REPORT OF MEETING ON 8/3/73 BETWEEN MESSRS COSGRAVE  
AND CORISH AND PRIME MINISTER HEATH.

The meeting started at shortly after 4 p.m. and ended at 6 p.m. Present at the meeting were:

Irish Side

Mr L Cosgrave  
Mr B Corish  
Mr Hugh J McCann  
Dr D O'Sullivan.

British Side

Mr Heath  
Sir Alec Douglas-Home  
Sir Burke Trend, Secretary of the Cabinet  
Mr R Armstrong, Principal Private Secretary  
Mr C Roberts, Private Secretary.

In welcoming the visitors the Prime Minister said that he was very glad of the opportunity to talk to them because of the imminence of the issue of the White Paper. He had, he said, fixed a meeting with Mr Lynch for February, but this had to be put off because of the General Election. Mr Heath said he was most grateful to Messrs Cosgrave and Corish for coming to see him. He regretted that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland could not be present. He had just left for the North accompanied by the Labour Spokesman on Northern affairs.

The Prime Minister went on to say that he would like first of all to talk about the general basis of the

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discussion which he would be having with the visitors. He and they, he said, are representatives of Sovereign Governments. What happens in the North is a matter for Westminster as there is no Parliament or Government in Belfast. He acknowledged that Dublin has a keen interest in the solution to be found for the North.

The Prime Minister then went on to talk about the frank and confidential talks which he had had with the outgoing Taoiseach. He wanted the current talks to be in the same character. Neither side should feel under any obligation to tell the press or Parliament what had been discussed. On that basis both sides could help one another and they could talk very frankly.

The Prime Minister said that there has been no discussion on the White Paper as such with anybody in Northern Ireland. Mr Whitelaw has had talks with political representatives there and the Prime Minister himself met a number of them when he was in Belfast before Christmas. There was an understanding between the Prime Minister and Mr Lynch to talk about the content of the White Paper when Mr Lynch would be in a position to influence attitudes towards it. The White Paper proposals have not yet received the approval of the Cabinet. A date for the issue of the White Paper has not yet been fixed but it is likely to be published in about a fortnight from now.

The Prime Minister then went on to talk about the background to the British Government's thinking in relation to what the White Paper should contain. He said that



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at the end of last March the Government had taken the very difficult decision to introduce direct rule in the North. The decision to prorogue the Northern Parliament after it had been in power for 50 years had been no easy matter. The Prime Minister referred to the bipartisan policy in Westminster in relation to the North and said that Parliament as a whole had been most helpful on the subject. After prorogation of the Northern Parliament the first thing the Government here had to address itself to was the carrying out speedily of the reform programme. Many important reforms had been put into effect by means of orders in Council. Next the Government had to address itself to the question of Local Government reform. The Local Government Elections were postponed because the Election Officers were opposed to the holding of the Elections at the time suggested on the basis of the old register. The Local Government Elections are yet to come. They will present considerable problems. There is, for example, an acute apprehension about Derry where the Local Authority could well become a Republican body. The Derry Commission has done a magnificent job and the question which will arise is whether or not the Commission should be swept away.

The Prime Minister then came on to the question of what he called "the process of constitutional reform and the Border". He said that politics in the North have been dominated by the Border during the past 50 years and political parties have divided on the sole issue of the Border. Because of this situation Westminster felt that something should be done to try and take

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the Border out of politics so that Northern politicians could then concentrate on bread and butter matters. It was against this background that the Border poll had been provided for. People may argue that the result of the poll is a foregone conclusion, but this is no valid argument. If the Border can be taken out of politics in the North it is conceivable that new political parties might emerge.

The Prime Minister concluded this part of his remarks by saying that there are two major aspects of the constitutional position in the North. The first of these is to devise an acceptable form of internal administration and the second is to give appropriate expression to the Irish dimension. The Irish dimension was, in fact, recognised 50 years ago, but no action had been taken to give expression to it.

The Prime Minister continued to develop his ideas on the constitutional aspect and he talked about the different possibilities in this field. On the question of complete integration of the North with Britain he said this would be by far the simplest solution, but there are many arguments against it. It would impose an intolerable burden on Westminster to legislate for the area. The loss of a Parliamentary organisation in the North would be deeply felt there. Westminster fully recognised that the Republic would regard integration as a retrograde step. The Prime Minister stressed that he would not, however, rule out the fact that this may have to be



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the solution if no other alternative were likely to work.

He then mentioned the suggestion for a UDI. He has already made it clear that if a UDI situation were to come into being the North could not expect to get any money from Britain. The area is not itself viable and the withdrawal of the contribution of £300 million a year would mean a drastic reduction in the standard of living. It is a matter of no small concern to Britain that her expenditure on the North is constantly on the increase.

The Prime Minister then came to the final possibility, namely, the establishment of an Assembly in the North with limited responsibilities and continuance of the situation of having a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. This is the type of arrangement which the White Paper envisages. It is proposed that elections to the Assembly will be on the basis of proportional representation. What result the Election will provide is hard to say. The administration envisaged for the North would be unicameral. It is proposed that the Assembly will be able to introduce legislation in the field of the responsibilities delegated to it. The legislation must, however, have the consent of the Queen in Council on the advice of the Secretary of State. The Opposition Parties have been sounded on these proposals for the Assembly and their tendency is to support them.

On the question of the Executive of the Assembly, the Prime Minister said that the question to which considerable

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thought had been given was that of the powers to be entrusted to it. The responsibility for security would have to remain with Westminster certainly for as long as the situation continues. The Westminster Parliament would, however, from time to time devolve certain security powers as the administration in the North proved itself capable of handling them. The Prime Minister went on to say that the Green Paper recognised the need for shared power in the Executive. Their feeling now is that, having set out the broad outline of the proposal for the new administration, it would not be wise to indicate in the White Paper how the arrangement should work. The important thing is to give the new arrangement an opportunity to work out its own destiny. Anyhow, it is impossible to say what the new Assembly will be like as there has been no election for some years and nobody knows what political parties will emerge.

The normal way to create the Executive would be to base it on the largest political party, but this would merely be a continuation of the problem which has existed for 50 years. Again, one could, for example, give two-thirds of the places in the Executive to the majority and one-third to the minority. This would be open to the strong objection that it would amount to the formalisation of sectarian politics. It would be a retrograde step. Why set up an administration designed to remove discrimination and at the same time give formal recognition to the incidents of sectarian differences.



Another way of handling the situation would be to give the different political parties representation on the Executive in proportion to their strength. This could have one good effect in that it would prevent parties from splintering. Representation on the Executive on a party basis would not carry the tag of religion. One overriding problem, however, is that if an election is fought on different policies and you finish up with a Coalition in the Executive of all the parties involved it may well prove impossible to get a policy which would work.

Mr. Corish intervened to say that Coalitions have worked and are, in fact, working very effectively in many European countries. The Prime Minister agreed but made the point that these Coalitions have come together voluntarily. Mr. Cosgrave drew the analogy with the Public Accounts Committee and the Prime Minister made the point that the Public Accounts Committee has no Executive responsibilities.

Summarising his views on the Executive of the Assembly the Prime Minister said that his view is that the best way to approach the matter is to provide first of all for the election of the Assembly and then for the Secretary of State to discuss with the leaders of political parties how best to form an Executive. Once this had been done Westminster would then devolve the certain powers. The Prime Minister said that he did not at all underestimate the serious problems which would exist. However, if there could not be agreement



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on the over-all arrangement by the political parties in the North there would have to be a continuation of direct rule.

On the question of the Irish dimension here again the Prime Minister felt that it would be a mistake to define this in detail in advance. After very full consideration of the matter he had come to the conclusion that the best arrangement would be to call a tripartite conference after the establishment of the Assembly and the Executive to discuss the structure and functions of a Council of Ireland. He then raised the question whether the Council should be tripartite or simply a North South Council. He went on to indicate that there are many areas of activity in the North which involve a Westminster responsibility. There is then the EEC question and this is a matter between Westminster and Dublin.

Mr Corish enquired of the Prime Minister as to the type of PR to be introduced. The Prime Minister replied that consideration had been given to two possibilities, e.g. the single transferable or the German system. While he himself would have opted for the German system he had been persuaded by his colleagues that the other was the more suitable. In reply to a further question from Mr. Corish the Prime Minister indicated that the General Election in the North would, on this occasion, be on the basis of the present constituencies. Later at dinner the Prime Minister confirmed that this related to the Westminster constituencies.

Mr Cosgrave thanked the Prime Minister for the

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invitation to come to London. He mentioned that he and Mr. Corish are not yet in Government. Mr. Cosgrave went on to say that the problem about the North is to get a system of administration that would work and that would provide impartial treatment of the minority. It must be a system which will be capable of carrying conviction. Dublin has consistently maintained that the settlement of the Northern problem could only be reached on the basis of agreement by the interests concerned. There could be no question of achieving a united Ireland through compulsion. The border has always been an issue because the majority wanted it and the minority did not.

Mr. Cosgrave went on to say that he welcomed the indications about the White Paper given by the Prime Minister. He was glad to see that elections in the North would be on the basis of P R. Effective power sharing would be crucial in the context of the Executive of the new Assembly. He was disturbed to see that it is not proposed to define clearly in the White Paper how power sharing will be arranged. Equally, he was disturbed to learn that the Council of Ireland would be a matter for settlement after the establishment of the Northern Assembly.

The Prime Minister in reply said that there would be difficulties in defining more specifically the system of power sharing. It would, however, be made clear in the White Paper that the Executive can no longer, in the divided community in the North, be based on any single party if that party draws its support from one section of the community. He went on to say that the actual form of power sharing would have to meet with the approval of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and confirmed, in



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reply to a question from Mr. Corish, that the Secretary of State would have the power of veto.

Mr. Cosgrave enquired whether in the event of disagreement in the Executive on matters of policies the Secretary of State would have discretion to intervene. Mr. Heath replied that if the matter was one of discriminatory character then the Secretary of State would certainly have discretion. Questioned as to whether the Executive would be chosen immediately from the Assembly, the Prime Minister indicated that once the Assembly had been elected the Secretary of State would talk to the leaders of the various parties and would ask how they proposed to meet the criteria for an executive.

Mr. Corish raised the question of a Bill of Rights and said that this would be of considerable importance to the minority. The Prime Minister said that there is already a large volume of legislation in the North covering various aspects of human rights. In fact Northern Ireland has more anti-discrimination legislation than England. The job now is to put these various pieces of legislation together and to add an important element to them. The main element now missing is discrimination in the matter of employment and it is hoped to provide a draft of this fairly soon.

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Mr. Corish then turned to the question of a Council of Ireland. It was, he said, essential that it should have specific functions, otherwise it may turn out merely to be a facade. A Council of Ireland should be given the utmost scope and if this were to happen, politicians on both sides of the Border would in time find that they had increasing common ground. There then followed a general discussion on functions which a Council might discharge in relation to tourism, regional policy and other matters. Mr. Heath said that he would give serious consideration to the points which had been made.

The Prime Minister then made the point that one of his difficulties is to find leadership in the minority community. This he discussed with the Cardinal when they met. The Cardinal should not be expected to provide leadership as he has his own responsibilities. New leaders may, of course, emerge. Nobody can, at this stage, say what will be the future of the Unionist Party. Sir Alec Douglas Home intervened to say that since it is impossible at this stage to say what will emerge from a General Election in the North, it would be a mistake to be too specific about the Executive of the Assembly. The Prime Minister said that he would personally prefer a rigid constitution for the North but the question which arises is that if one were too rigid, the majority representatives may take the line that they could not or would not work the system and then Westminster would find itself back where it is today.

Mr. Corish said that he and Mr. Cosgrave would have to think over what the Prime Minister had said about the contents of the White Paper. Their problem is that they



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have as yet no Government to consult. He enquired of the Prime Minister whether there are any indications as to what the political factions in the North would think of the proposals. The Prime Minister replied that they had not been consulted. He did not think that P.R. would be a breaking point with the Unionists. Again there would be no problem about the size of the Assembly.

Mr Cosgrave enquired about the timetable for the issue of the White Paper and said that he had heard a suggestion that it would be issued on the 19th March. The Prime Minister thought it could come a little later than that.

This concluded the substantive discussion. It was agreed that the press might be told that both sides had begun some very interesting discussions and that these would be carried on after dinner. In fact, the least said to the press the better. The indications in relation to the content of the White Paper are strictly confidential. It would be alright to indicate to the press that there had been a general discussion of future developments and that the question of the Irish dimension had been more fully discussed. Mr Heath thought it would be helpful if the Irish side could stress in the talks with the press that both Governments have a common interest in peace in Northern Ireland.

This concluded the afternoon session.