

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2014/32/1940
Creation Date(s):	13 February 1984
Extent and medium:	3 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Access Conditions:	Open
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See by Sec. 1412

Conversation between Mr. Hume and Mrs. Thatcher

Hume saw Thatcher for an hour on the evening of Thursday 9 February. She was accompanied by Michael Allison, Mrs. Thatcher's Parliamentary Secretary (he was formally a Junior Minister at the Northern Ireland Office and played an important role in the abortive negotiations on the hunger strike with the Commission for Justice and Peace in 1981 when he changed the position of the British authorities from a flexible back to a harder line using the phrase "there is a lady behind the veil", referring to the Prime Minister).

The meeting took the form of Hume proposing that they should discuss the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Forum, the process of "disintegration" in the Catholic Community in Northern Ireland and the economic situation. Mrs. Thatcher agreed to this and throughout the meeting confined her intervention to asking questions rather than making observations. Mr. Allison made one interesting observation at the conclusion.

Hume gave his well known arguments on the Assembly: the SDLP had three times joined in an effort to share power; three times the Unionists had made it clear that they would not agree to this; the British had supported the Unionists refusal on all occasions; it would have been an action of political folly for the SDLP to have campaigned on a platform of agreement to taking part in a charade which the Unionists of both the OUP and the DUP had more clearly than ever ruled out any possibility of power sharing in advance of the Assembly elections.

At this stage Hume said a few words about his own personal background: he had never had an interest in political activity before being thrown into it by the events of the late 1960's; his endeavour throughout had been to lead young people in a positive direction and away from violence; he gave some details of his personal situation, living in the Bogside and coming from a Derry working class background.

Hume then tried to explain the the problem of alienation, using rather blunt language. In reply to a question from the Prime Minister as to how this had been generated, he said that it was the handling of the hunger-strike which had more than anything else had worsened the situation. He said that young people who were now 18 could remember nothing except violence and the military presence in their lives. Most young Catholic people had been subjected to harrassment just because they were known to come from Catholic areas. The level and prospects of employment was such that young people were an easy prey for the IRA. On the alienation aspect of law and order, he said that law and order was administered by "the enemy", that is forces that were seen as supporting a repressive State and also which were seen as being alien and not "Irish". He said that the British had then developed a way of life in which symbols played a considerable part in the system of security and justice and he gave instances of this, arguing that it was both the presence of this "alien" system of symbols and the absence of their own "Irish" security and legal systems which provoked alienation most acutely. Hume said that to his surprise Mrs. Thatcher did not "bridle" at any of this.

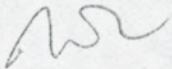
Hume also set out his hopes for the Forum: that it would report quickly; that the report would be on the basis of concensus; that it would be such that the British could and would respond to it.

Mrs. Thatcher was impressed, he felt, by his description of the economic circumstances of Northern Ireland, in particular by the way they affected the minority community.

Hume's feeling was that Mrs. Thatcher, while reasonably well briefed as to the facts of the situation, still had not developed an adequate "feel" for it.

At the conclusion Mrs. Thatcher suggested that Hume and she should stay in touch.

As the discussion was ending Allison asked Hume whether he felt that he could agree that any solution to the problem of Northern Ireland would have to involve a high degree of autonomy for the North. Hume said that he "absolutely" agreed.



M.J. Lillis

13 February 1984

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