



**An Chartlann Náisiúnta**  
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**Reference Code:** 2021/44/123

**Creator(s):** Department of Foreign Affairs

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### Meeting with Raymond Ferguson

1. I met with Raymond Ferguson in Enniskillen on 8 November. He was very friendly and forthcoming (he expressed himself "pleased and honoured" to have been invited to the dinner for Queen Beatrix) but clearly deeply disillusioned with the political scene in the North and increasingly turning his attention to various business projects he has in hand.

### Brooke Initiative

2. He said that he personally never had much hope for the Brooke initiative. Molyneaux has no capacity for imaginative thinking - he is essentially "a scribe, a clerk". Paisley's strength is his ability to articulate the negative feelings of his constituents; he has neither the interest nor the capacity to deliver anything positive. Robinson currently has the posture of a disappointed man who is not going to push things any further.
3. At grassroots level, Ferguson said, people have lost interest in the initiative. The whole discussion has become too complex and the nuances of positions on both sides are simply not understood by ordinary people. For his part, Ferguson accepts the justification of the Irish Government's position : he has no doubt that, unless there is a firm commitment to North-South talks, the Unionists will "try to string out the internal talks for as long as possible."

### Long-term Solutions

4. Ferguson's own analysis (proving how untypical a Unionist he is) is that the only long term solution is some kind of federal arrangement on the island. The root of the problem

is that neither community in the North will accept minority status - thus Unionists will not contemplate a united Ireland and nationalists will not be locked into a Northern context. A federal solution, involving a Northern 'entity' and an all-island structure, would mean that each community had majority status in one context and minority status in the other; such a balance offers the best prospect for long term stability. (One point on which he laid emphasis was that any all-island structure must have a security dimension).

5. His view is that any solution which was acceptable to Sinn Fein/IRA, thus bringing an end to the IRA campaign, would by definition be seen by the Unionists as a sell-out and therefore inevitably lead to a Protestant backlash. In response to my question as to whether a cessation of IRA violence might not be seen as an overriding benefit as far as Unionists were concerned, Ferguson said it was not a question of peace at any price - Unionists simply would not acquiesce in what they would perceive as a sell-out.

#### Anglo-Irish Agreement

6. While Unionists have not come to terms with the Anglo-Irish Agreement, Ferguson said that they do not perceive it in the same threatening terms they did at the outset. Increasingly, the Unionist perception is that the Conference is no more than a talking shop. "In almost all cases, the British go ahead and do what they were going to do anyway". There are, he said, one or two instances where the Irish Government can claim some influence: the handling of parades ("but the RUC were making some attempt to bring the Orange Order into line anyway") and the fair employment legislation ("but everyone knows the pressure was building up on the British in this area").

#### Nationalist Attitudes

7. Ferguson said that the widespread Unionist perception is that nationalists are "constantly in search of a grievance" - a community "with a chip on its shoulder". There were legitimate grievances in the past but they have very largely been rectified. In the fair employment area, for example, there is considerable Unionist scepticism about Catholic unemployment figures. While it is accepted that there is a genuine problem in the 17-25 age group, the view is that the majority of Catholic men in their mid twenties upwards, usually married with a couple of children, are drawing substantial unemployment benefit while working on the side. Ferguson quoted various local examples to support this contention; he also alleged there was only one officer for the whole of Fermanagh to detect social welfare fraud. (Clearly, whatever the reality, Unionist perception is that official figures greatly exaggerate Catholic unemployment).

#### Extradition

8. Ferguson said he could not exaggerate the importance of the extradition issue to the Unionist community; it was regarded as the touchstone of Dublin's commitment to the defeat of terrorism. As long as there was felt to be an equivocation about extradition, statements from Dublin about commitment to security co-operation inevitably had a hollow ring.

#### Interreg

9. Ferguson was strongly supportive of Interreg as offering an opportunity to promote cross-border co-operation; the Fermanagh Council, he said, has submitted a detailed application and is ready to work closely with Councils on the southern side.

Unionist Contact with Dublin

10. Finally, Ferguson said that despite Molyneaux's narrowness of approach, he is not without interest in establishing a degree of contact with Dublin. Some time ago, Ferguson received a message through an intermediary that Molyneaux would like him to be a channel for contact with the Irish Government. Ferguson said his reaction was one of extreme wariness since "at the first sign of trouble, Molyneaux would completely disown me". He had accordingly sent a message back that he would like Molyneaux to put something in writing to him; predictably, he had heard nothing further.

A.A.

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12 November, 1990

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