



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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crisis with intermediaries and well-meaning interventionists like the Red Cross. He "shuddered to think" what would have happened if the Conference had been in existence at the time; there would have been ad hoc meetings every fortnight. Only two groups had known what was really at stake and they were the NIO and the prisoners themselves. It had been essential not to make a concession on criminal status and no such concession had been made (note: this of course is arguable). He was praising of the management of prison issues in recent years; it had been the single most important area of progress; grounds for complaint had been removed and risks had been taken - so far so good - with releases and compassionate leave; but if a similar situation occurred again the same resolute line would have to be taken.

Sir John added that the episode had also flushed out the full extent of backing for the IRA, North and South. It had marked the highest level of IRA support and that support had been shown to be not very great, although Bobby Sands' victory in the Fermanagh-South Tyrone by-election had been an initial shock. Sir John clearly did not think the election victories in the South to be of great consequence and did not agree with my suggestion that the affair had had the potential to cause a much more serious destabilisation of constitutional politics.

These comments led on to a view that the premise of growing Nationalist alienation on which the Agreement had been based was false. Sir John said he had told Robert Armstrong as much two days after Hillsborough. He agreed that the Agreement had strengthened the London-Dublin link considerably, but to the disadvantage of the prospects for devolution in Northern Ireland. He could not see that the Agreement had achieved much, especially in the security area where it had spawned no major developments and no new security institutions in contrast with the fast developing institutionalisation of security co-operation in Europe.

In fact, he thought the Agreement had served more to avoid problems than to deal with them; and in his experience, more often than not, the two Governments passed each other like two ships in the night. He agreed that the Secretariat had become a useful bridge between the two Governments and that contacts between civil servants North and South had developed in a major and valuable way, although he was doubtful of bringing economic and social issues involving Northern civil servants into the Conference.

BIA

Sir John raised what he called our relative lack of representation at the recent conference of the BIA in Oxford. He was especially critical of the absence of a Department of Justice official or of any security representative (a matter also raised with me by Mr Alston after the conference). He said he did not wish to sound too important, but he had found that he and Mr. Cope together with the RUC and British Army

We consciously decided against sending 'security' personnel to the BIA Conference — we feel that operational security matters are inappropriate for a semi-public forum such as the BIA. DAE.

*and the British were
never represented at the Conference!*

representatives in the security group had been balanced on our side by a Counsellor of the Department of Foreign Affairs for one session and by the Embassy Press Officer thereafter. He thought this was letting things go too far. There seemed to be an element of wanting to run away from the issue of security co-operation and here he referred also to our refusal to accept a security presentation by the police in the full Conference although he mentioned that the Minister had been right to react strongly against a "lecture" by Jack Hermon at a Conference a couple of years ago.

I asked if it was wise to discuss sensitive issues of security co-operation such as hot pursuit, overflights and Army-to-Army contact (which were all raised in the security group) in a semi-public forum and I recalled that journalists were present at the BIA and, despite injunctions, had published material gathered there in the past. We had had a fair number of people present, including the Minister for Health, the Secretary to the Government, the Taoiseach's Special Advisor and the Ambassador in London. I added that the Embassy Press Officer who had attended the security group had recently worked in Dublin on security and "confidence" issues and was very competent in them.

I suggested that there had been greater improvement in security co-operation in the last three and a half years than in any comparable period. That was surely the important thing. Sir John did not disagree but said that people were still dying, implying that much more was needed to be done.

I asked if there was not an element of propaganda in the British position on security co-operation and I noted that we still get beaten over the head quite regularly on extradition despite the fact that we did exactly what we were asked to do in 1985 by ratifying the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism, despite the fact that our arrangements with Britain were probably in advance of any other arrangements in the world and despite general agreement that the "product" of extradition was not likely to be very considerable and that practical means of security co-operation were far more important.

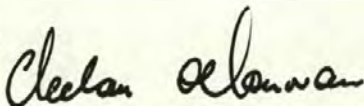
Comment

Sir John's remarks were made in an easy albeit provoking way and he clearly enjoyed the opportunity of his impending retirement to be much more frank than usual. Many other subjects were touched on, including the political talks (he is an instinctive Unionist), Articles 2 and 3, whether we really wanted a United Ireland (why had we never made the Unionists a specific offer of seats in Cabinet and in the Dail?) and - inevitably - the 48 hour shopping rule. But as a former official of the Ministry of Defence, his main interest has been security and this dominated his conversation.

As may be seen from his view of the hunger strike period, there is a strong element in British thinking that security concerns must be pressed even if they do cause friction or even major controversy, and that wider debate on them would in fact show considerable public support North and South for strong measures.

I stressed in contrast the danger that the Garda authorities would lose public support and the effectiveness of quiet diplomacy. I recalled in ending the table conversation the famous remark by Sam Johnson that "Much may be made of a Scotchman . . . if he be caught young!" regretting that we had not had an opportunity to influence him sooner. Sir John expressed delight with this remark suggesting that he thought the sentiment behind it might be shared in his office!

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Declan O'Donovan'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Declan' being more prominent and the last name 'O'Donovan' following in a similar style.

Declan O'Donovan
Joint Secretary