

State papers

Prospect of NIO minister attending GAA game discussed



■ FINAL: Terence McNaughton of Antrim rises to snatch the sliotar ahead of two Tipperary players in the 1989 All-Ireland senior hurling final

Eamon Phoenix

THE possibility of a British direct rule minister attending a GAA game concentrated NIO minds in 1989.

In a memo to officials, dated October 5, Secretary of State Peter Brooke's private secretary SJ Leach felt that "the continued attendance of British ministers at rugby matches (in Dublin), but not at hurling or Gaelic football matches, may be used as a sign of continued unwillingness on HMG's (her majesty's government) side to recognise the traditions of the minority community".

Mr Leach said Mr Brooke had remarked to him "that if a volunteer is required to watch hurling or Gaelic football, he would be happy to undertake this role, if only out of curiosity".

He asked officials to advise on the practicalities, adding: "Given the hostility to the security forces in the GAA's constitution, there would presumably be sensitivities about the secretary of

state attending any game held under GAA auspices."

The security aspect would also have to be considered, though Mr Leach felt there would be "considerable political and symbolic benefit in attending a hurling, Gaelic football or even a camogie match".

Responding on October 10, AW Stephens of the law and order section of the NIO cautioned that while such a visit would have a "positive" effect, a problem arose in ministers attending events under GAA auspices "so long as the association maintains its absolute bar against accepting anyone who was serving in the British army and RUC".

Such ministerial attendance would "cause considerable offence to the police and army which would outweigh any political benefit" and the "onus for change lay with the GAA".

Responding, Brian Blackwell, another NIO official, acknowledged the issue of the ban but said: "To wait for the other side to make the first gesture of

reconciliation is for (the British government) to adopt the posture of both sides in NI of which we so frequently despair."

He then revealed that the British ambassador to Ireland, Sir Nicholas Fenn, had recently attended the All-Ireland hurling final.

In a report dated September 5 from the ambassador in Dublin to Timothy George of the Foreign and Colonial Office (FCO) Sir Nicholas wrote: "We had recommended that a NIO minister should consider attending (the game) since Antrim was contesting the final for the first time since 1943, in order to demonstrate an even-handed interest in the sporting activities of both communities in NI."

He revealed that NIO minister Dr Brian Mawhinney had "preferred not to do so" and the "NIO were sceptical and the FCO helpfully agnostic".

The embassy duly telephoned the GAA and asked if the ambassador might attend and "after three days of horrified silence, they provided a

courteous letter of invitation and four complementary tickets".

Sir Nicholas was told by the leader of the Irish Labour Party, Dick Spring, that while some members of the GAA had objected, "the question had been referred for resolution to the taoiseach [Charlie Haughey]".

The ambassador said he was received with courtesy and "the taoiseach himself went out of his way to say how glad he was to see me there".

The game clearly impressed him: "Hurling is a fast and exciting game and it was played with great skill (otherwise people would have got killed!). Antrim was no match for Tipperary and were outclassed from the beginning."

The ambassador's attendance attracted little attention though he wrote: "Dick Spring tells me that some of the GAA feared I would seek to present myself as the ambassador for Antrim".

He concluded that "one more small Anglo-Irish barrier had been broken".

IRA plan to exploit key Tory policy

Michael McHugh

THE IRA planned to exploit Margaret Thatcher's signature privatisation policy to fund its activities, official records have disclosed.

Paramilitary-linked racketeers seeking lucrative public contracts during the Troubles employed benefit fraudsters to reduce wages and help reduce their costs – maximising their chances of winning competitive tenders often awarded to the cheapest bidder, the records show.

The swindle aimed to enable people linked to the Provos or loyalism to undercut other bidders.

Deals for low-skilled services such as contract cleaning in areas dominated by armed groups were amongst the most vulnerable to infiltration by organised crime, NIO officials said.

Privatisation was a defining policy of the Thatcher administration and the civil service was considering its roll-out in Northern Ireland in 1990.

An NIO official wrote: "They might employ people engaging in social security fraud in order to minimise wages and maximise their chances of winning the contract and increasing their profits."

Refuse collection, contract cleaning and street-sweeping were seen as vulnerable to racketeering, particularly in areas where paramilitaries dominated.

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