

State papers

Concern over 'hard-border' stance

Éamonn Phoenix

THE British government expressed concern in 1990 about the Irish government's '48 hours rule' for southern shoppers buying goods across the border. The measure, at a time when many shoppers from the Republic were travelling north to take advantage of lower prices, signalled Dublin's willingness at the time to impose a 'hard border' to protect its economy. In a letter dated January 13 1990 to CD Powell, private secretary to British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, Stephen Pope, the private secretary to secretary of state Peter Brooke, wrote: "The PM might like to

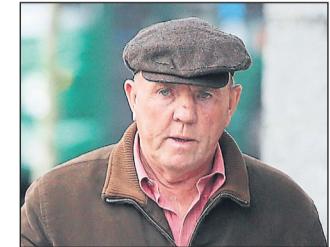
be aware that the Irish government introduced in 1987 restrictions on cross-border shopping. "The Irish measures denied to those out of Ireland for less than 48 hours the 'travellers' allowances' – freedom from Irish tax on NI purchases up to a certain limit – conferred by European law." The Irish measures were, the official said, "transparently illegal" and to the detriment of Northern Ireland traders. He informed Downing Street that the British government had taken this up with the European Commission who referred the case to the European Court. The court had just delivered its judgment, "declaring against the Irish on all counts" and

Mr Brooke had publicly urged the Irish government to come into line. Meanwhile, papers also reveal pressure from the Irish government to introduce a marker in petrol on sale in the north to curb cross-border smuggling. In a memo to Peter Brooke dated May 18 1989, Austin Wilton from the NIO noted that Irish officials had pointed to a link between cross-border fuel smuggling and "the financing of terrorism". The issue remained under discussion and in March 1990 a meeting of British and Irish officials failed to reach agreement on the extent of smuggling. Reviewing the issue in a memo to Mr Brooke on

March 30, Peter Bell of the Security Policy Division of the NIO noted: "The Irish will certainly argue that Mr (Thomas) Slab Murphy and his like are among the beneficiaries of British inaction". The official felt that ministers should ask the Irish government to supply "reliable facts and figures".



■ MEMO: Peter Brooke



■ NOTE: Thomas 'Slab' Murphy

Violent scenes at Stormont

OFFICIAL files released in Belfast this year include a report on violent scenes which marked the opening of the 1974 power-sharing executive and assembly at Stormont.

The document relates to scenes in the assembly chamber at Stormont on January 22 1974 when members of the anti-Sunningdale parties, led by Ian Paisley, seized the seats reserved for the new executive ministers, led by Ulster Unionist leader Brian Faulkner and SDLP leader Gerry Fitt.

They disrupted business and had to be physically ejected by the RUC.

In a report to the clerk of the assembly, Ronnie Blackburn, dated January 29, the sergeant at arms Captain John Cartillon noted that, in view of the "threat of disruption to the assembly", considerable police reinforcements had been laid on to deal with any possible disorder.

The official had arranged with Superintendent Gray of the RUC that "should fighting break out in the chamber, then the RUC would be requested to enter to stop any fighting, using the minimal force necessary".

In the event of members being suspended by the speaker, the clerk would direct the members to comply with the ruling. Failing this, he would involve the police who would, as a last resort, "physically remove the member or members concerned out of the chamber".

The official described the rowdy scenes which unfolded: "Immediately after prayers,



■ DISRUPTION: Ian Paisley, pictured in 1980

Major Hall-Thompson (Ulster Unionist) raised a point of order concerning the misappropriation of seats reserved for members of the executive.

"Mr Speaker ordered the members occupying those seats to vacate them. Dr Paisley rose on a point of order which Mr Speaker refused to accept.

"At this, a number of members rose to protest and uproar commenced.

"Among other disorders which I noticed, I particularly remember Mr [William] Beatie (DUP) snatching the mace and passing it to another member."

It was finally brought to the clerk who had it placed in safe custody until order was restored.

Meanwhile, the clerk observed a Vanguard member, Prof Kennedy Lindsay, jumping on a table and "carrying on what I can only describe as a 'war dance'".

The official ascertained that the offending members had been named by the speaker

and approached them individually with the request that they should leave the chamber.

He approached Mr Paisley who "said he would have to be put out by the British army. Abuse was hurled at me from other members including Mr Poots who shouted, 'If you don't get out quickly you will get hurt'."

The official took this to be a "threat and not a warning" and then sent for the RUC.

As police entered the assembly, the clerk observed Mr Paisley and other members "seizing the clerk's chairs and placing them as a sort of barricade".

"I remember noting Dr Paisley (and others) violently resisting the police."

Eventually all the members concerned had been ejected including Eileen Paisley "who offered no resistance".

The powersharing executive finally collapsed as a result of the Ulster Workers' Councils strike in May 1974, leading to 25 years of direct rule.

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