

Story of déjà vu for McMillan's Cabinet

CURRENT major issues such as the state of the economy, Sunday trading and Britain's role in Europe, were secretly troubling the Cabinet back in 1961.

Details revealed under the 30-year secrecy rule also show that Irish aggression against Kuwait and fears about immigration levels caused problems three decades ago.

And as another Christmas crackdown on motorists draws to a close, the Cabinet papers reveal how the government drew back from the "extreme" measure of introducing alcohol tests for suspected drink-drivers.

The documents, stored in the Public Records Office at Kew, are open to public view for the first time, giving the background of key decisions made by the Macmillan government.

They show that increasing worries about the state of the economy meant Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's 1959 boast "You Never Had It So Good" was little more than a memory two years later.

But even though Chancellor of the Exchequer Selwyn Lloyd described the situation as "more serious than at any time in the last 10 years", the problems faced were minor compared to now.

Production showed little sign of increasing despite rising demand and higher investment. The balance of payments was deteriorating and there was a "critical" exchange position.

Prices were up 2.7 per cent on the previous year.

The government was forced to introduce a mid-budget in July, with tax increases, a rise in the bank rate from 5 to 7 per cent and the "pay pause".

Sunday trading was a little hot potato, although the idea in 1961 came not from commercial interests but from the reforming zeal of Home Secretary R A Butler.

He wanted to modernise Sunday observance laws but after warnings from Cabinet Secretary Sir Norman Brook that interference with Sunday could prove "a grave political embarrassment" in the run-up to the next general election, the Cabinet shelved the issue.

The Conservative Party and the Cabinet were wracked by tensions and divisions over Europe in the year Britain applied to join the Community.

Mr Macmillan had to attempt to reach agreement with his own ministers, French President Charles de Gaulle and Commonwealth countries who were hostile to the move.

Thirty years before the Gulf war, British troops were sent to Kuwait after Iraqi aggression — a decision driven partly by oil interests.

The Emir of Kuwait requested Britain's help to protect his country against any attempt by Iraq to take it over. Troops were sent but withdrawn when the threat failed to materialise.

The government acted to curb immigration after hearing that Britain could end up with a severe "race problem".

Lord Chancellor Lord Kilmer told ministers: "Uncontrolled coloured immigration on this scale is putting a severe strain on the housing situation in the areas in which these people congregate."

Government documents which have been kept secret for the past 30 years have been opened to public scrutiny. Dr Eamon Phoenix examines their importance and puts them in their historical context.

1961 was marked in the North by the continuation of an increasingly desultory level of the IRA border campaign, code-named "Operation Harvest". Bereft of any real minority support, the campaign was to end abruptly in February 1962.

Kennedy victory scared unionists

UNIONISTS feared that the election of John F Kennedy to the United States Presidency at the end of 1960 would generate a revival of anti-partition agitation, the documents reveal.

At a meeting of the Unionist Cabinet Publicity Committee, held on November 9, 1960, the Minister of Home Affairs, Mr Brian Faulkner said that John Kennedy's election had a "special significance" for Northern Ireland. The views of the President-elect were well-known and the "Irish Lobby" could expect to receive a "sympathetic hearing" from him.

But the Minister of Finance, Captain O'Neill took the view that the British Consul-General and the British Information Service in New York were sympathetic to Ulster's cause and could be relied upon to keep a watching brief. The situation would require careful study.

Mr A J Kelly, the Stormont Cabinet Secretary, "while not denying the unfortunate nature of the result from a Northern Ireland point of view, felt that too much weight should not be attached to statements made by any candidate with an eye to the occupancy of the White House".

After further discussion, the Prime Minister, Lord Brookeborough, said he would make casual reference to the matter in his forthcoming conversation with Mr Harold Macmillan.

The issue was raised again in December 1960 in a letter to Lord Brookeborough from the Unionist MP for South Antrim and Parliamentary Private Secretary to Mr Harold Macmillan, Sir Knox Cunningham. The MP quoted a friend and leading

American lawyer as writing: "It would not surprise me very much if there develops a revival of the effort to bring Ulster into Southern Ireland... Now that we have a strong Roman Catholic family at the head of our government and in control of the Democratic Party, I anticipate that an effort will be made to revive the old issue and take Ulster over into the Dublin Government..."

In his reply on January 3, 1961, Mr Kelly observed that both the Ministers of Finance and Commerce, (Captain O'Neill and Lord Glenorran) had formed a similar view

When in a further letter, Sir Knox stressed the "constitutional" difficulties which Kennedy's presidency must cause, the Prime Minister was inclined to agree: "The 'new boy' will have plenty to do about external and internal affairs for the time being and will want to consolidate his small majority."

"But I agree with your estimate that we may have difficulties ahead because there will be stronger overt and covert pressures than ever before to do something about the 'old country'. We must ensure that United Kingdom representatives everywhere in the North America are fully documented."

With remarkable foresight, Sir Knox warned Lord Brookeborough in a final missive on March 20, 1961: "The next move will be an invitation to de Valera to visit the White House or from de Valera to Mr Kennedy to visit Ireland. It will be interesting to watch developments."

The President was to pay his historic visit to Ireland in 1963.

Despite the deaths of two RUC men during the year, Minister of Home Affairs Brian Faulkner was sufficiently confident in April to release the last batch of internees.

Unemployment remained high in the declining traditional industries. In the first nine months of 1961, 10,000 men were laid off in Belfast shipyard alone. Notwithstanding these difficulties and the closure of several major linen concerns, the Conservative government of Harold Macmillan firmly ruled out

any hope of special treatment for the north's ailing economy.

This year also saw the initiation of a major house-building programme designed to tackle a long standing social problem.

On the political front, the Brookeborough cabinet watched with some trepidation the accession of President John F Kennedy to the White House, fearing a revival of the diplomatic campaign against Partition. At the same time, ministers considered

the implications of any British entry into the Common Market for Northern Ireland's constitutional position, expressing particular fears at proposals for the free movement of labour.

The Stormont cabinet

The Northern Ireland cabinet in 1960 was headed by Viscount Brookeborough (Minister of Home Affairs) and included in addition: Captain Terence O'Neill (Minister of Finance); Mr Brian Faulkner (Minister of Home Affairs); Mr J L O Andrews (Minister of Commerce); Mr Morris May (Minister of Education); Mr Harry West (Minister of the Cabinet career as Minister of Agriculture); Mr William Morgan (Minister of Health and Local Government) and Major Ivan Neill (Minister of Labour and National Insurance).

Appointee rejected in favour of a Catholic

THE headline Stormont Minister of Home Affairs, Sir Dawson Bates refused, in 1940, to uphold the appointment of a Protestant candidate to a medical position in Belfast Union Hospital.

His reason was that a rejected candidate, a leading Catholic doctor and MP for Queen's University, was better qualified.

In July 1940, Sir Dawson wrote to the Prime Minister, Viscount Craigavon, explaining that the Commissioners at their recent meeting had appointed Dr Reginald Hall to a vacant position in the Fever Department of the Union Hospital.

However, "when the papers in connection with Dr Hall's appointment were submitted to my Ministry for approval, it was realised that as Dr Hall had qualified as recently as 1936, the Ministry would have some difficulty in standing over this appointment."

Accordingly, the Commissioners were asked to submit the names and qualifications of the other applicants.

"Having carefully perused these", Sir Dawson informed the Prime Minister, "the Ministry, without hesitation, came to the conclusion that the only suitable candidate was Dr F McSorley."

As a result, the Minister summoned the Commissioners to Stormont where they were informed that he could not approve their appointment.

In reply to the deputation's claim that Dr Hall had had a "brilliant" academic career, "we pointed out that for the vacant position we considered a person not only of brilliance but of experience should be appointed and, furthermore, Dr Hall was a dermatologist and had no special qualification for this particular post."

"We also pointed out that Dr McSorley had special qualifications in infectious diseases, having obtained his MD degree ... and that having these special qualifications it was very difficult for the Ministry to approve the appointment of Dr Hall."

In the upshot, the Minister arranged that the Commissioners should ask the appointee to withdraw his candidature. This, he told Craig, was "being done with the object of relieving the Ministry of any criticism of having had to turn down the advice of our officials."

Dr McSorley was duly appointed, but the post was to remain a contentious one long after his death. In 1959, the issue of ensuring at least one Catholic consultant at Belfast City Hospital (the former Union Hospital) was the subject of intense lobbying by the Irish Government and the Northern Nationalist Party.

On October 23, 1959, the creation of a vacancy for a consultant at the hospital was raised by the Irish Ambassador in London, Mr Joe Stewart MP and Senator J G Lennon and including Senator P F McGill, Mr Cahill Healy, MP, Mr Joe Stewart MP and Mr Rodrick O'Connor, MP.

The deputation "expressed their concern that the consultant post ... should be filled by a Roman Catholic and argued the claims of Dr Donaghy."

They added that "it would be most unfortunate if it were not filled by a co-religionist in view of the fact that only eight consultant posts out of a total of 470 were held by Roman Catholics."

In conclusion, the Nationalist stressed that their position as public representatives would become very difficult "if this particular appointment did not go to a Catholic."

The Minister of Health agreed on the suggestion of Lord Brookeborough to consider the points raised by the deputation.

A final note on the file dated February 1960 suggests that the Stormont government acceded to the Nationalist request; it reads simply: "City Hospital: latest — Minister has dropped a hint to Hospital's Authority."



Unionists were worried that John F Kennedy's election as American president would revive anti-partition sentiment in Ireland.

Shipyard told 'no special treatment'



Lord Brookeborough

AT Joint Ministerial discussions in London on the problem of unemployment in Northern Ireland in 1961, Lord Brookeborough and his Cabinet colleagues were told bluntly that there was "no hope of special treatment for Harland and Wolff".

Their British counterparts made clear that it was now government policy to place Admiralty work on the basis of the best tender.

"The responsibility for obtaining orders, therefore, rested with management and workers who should realise that future orders depended on competitive prices and delivery dates."

This was revealed at a meeting of the Brookeborough Cabinet at Stormont Castle on March 20, 1961. The Prime Minister told ministers that he would be willing to meet representatives of the shipyard management and

workers to explain the position. It was decided, however, that as a statement of public policy was involved, it should be made in Parliament.

The Minister of Commerce, Mr J L O Andrews reported two new industrial development schemes which would give additional employment to 2,300 workers. He felt that in the forthcoming Parliamentary debate mention should be made of an increase in the Government order for 10 aircraft. The firm was hopeful, however, of selling the planes abroad and in the civilian market. This seemed to offer the best chance of further orders.

The Minister of Labour and National Insurance, Major Neill said that the Home Secretary, Mr R A Butler, had urged the view that Northern Ireland could restore its competitive position by reducing wage rates and creating a differential between wages in the North and Britain. He, for his part, had rejected this suggestion because of the impossibility of breaking national wage agreements.

The Minister of Commerce, Mr Morris May, warned that one or two other large linen firms might be similarly affected in the near future. To avoid serious disturbances to the business of other firms, he suggested that a

consortium should be formed to take over the shipyard which might then be disposed of gradually without affecting prices generally.

The Stormont Cabinet in 1961 also moved swiftly to publish a report on areas for potential new housing in Belfast to prevent land speculation.

At its meeting on February 9, 1961, the Brookeborough Cabinet considered the Interim Report issued by Professor Robert Matthew, its planning consultant on a major housing programme for Belfast to resolve the serious housing crisis. The report specified areas capable of accommodating a total of 5,000 new homes.

They were unable to suggest any alternative to closure but had pointed out that the company's business would go to other local firms.

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consortium should be formed to take over the shipyard which might then be disposed of gradually without affecting prices generally.

Concluding, the Minister observed: "The UK government is not likely to search for arguments to oppose the Republic's attitude and it would be extremely embarrassing for us to be put in the position of pleading with the UK Government to resist a proposal by Eire to give Northern Ireland an advantage which might do a lot to help the economy."

Remembering that some tariff reduction for Northern-made furniture seemed

likely, the Minister felt that the Government had to decide which attitude to adopt "towards a situation in which a widening range of Northern Ireland goods might be accorded favourable treatment over British goods in the Republic market."

He thought the Government would find it difficult to stand in the way of these developments which would benefit Northern Ireland trade, but, on the other hand, for political and constitutional reasons, they should resist to be drawn into direct negotiations with the Southern authorities.

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Cross-border trade offer prompted political dilemma

THE Brookeborough Cabinet of 1961 was placed in a dilemma over signs that the Dublin government was prepared to reduce import duties on certain Northern Ireland goods, according to the files.

In a memo circulated to his colleagues in May 1961, the Minister of Commerce, Mr John Andrews, recalled: "When Anglo-Eire trade relations were last under negotiation, the United Kingdom Government recognised that a Free Trade Area between North and South would not be an acceptable solution, but the Board of Trade felt that

it might be possible to negotiate more limited arrangements to relieve from Southern customs duties a number of manufactured commodities made in Northern Ireland."

However, the Minister went on, subsequent discussions on this subject by the Unionist Cabinet and the Westminster Unionist MPs "showed there was a feeling that it would be dangerous to accept any changes in the tariffs on Northern Ireland goods entering the Republic unless the same changes applied equally to the same

class of goods imported from the UK generally."

The possibility of negotiating special arrangements intergovernmentally was therefore dropped.

From recent reports, however, it seemed that the Irish Government might be prepared to make special arrangements to allow Northern furniture to be imported without the payment of the normal duty chargeable on UK goods. Mr Andrews felt that the British Government would not take exception to this development. At the same time other industries and "even the Linn-

Trade" were interested in following the lead established by the furniture manufacturers.

Concluding, the Minister observed: "The UK government is not likely to search for arguments to oppose the Republic's attitude and it would be extremely embarrassing for us to be put in the position of pleading with the UK Government to resist a proposal by Eire to give Northern Ireland an advantage which might do a lot to help the economy."

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