

Public records shine new light on meetings between O'Neill and Lemass

Prime ministers talked only of mutual interest

Dr Eamon Phoenix examines what was said at the historic meetings between Sean Lemass and Terence O'Neill

REVEALING new light on the exchange of meetings between Captain Terence O'Neill, the Northern Ireland prime minister and the Taoiseach Sean Lemass is shed in confidential cabinet files just released by the public record office in Belfast. The two premiers met twice, first in Belfast on 14 January 1965 and later in Dublin, during O'Neill's return visit on 9 February 1965.

A press statement from the Northern Ireland government on 14 January 1965 announced the first encounter: "An historic meeting took place in Belfast today, when for the first time since the partition of Ireland over 40 years ago, the prime ministers of Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic met. Mr Sean Lemass accepted an invitation from Captain Terence O'Neill to lunch with himself and Mrs O'Neill at Stormont, seat of Northern Ireland's government."

After their talks the two men issued a terse joint statement: "We have today discussed matters in which there may prove to be a degree of common interest and have agreed to explore further what specific measures may be possible by way of practical consultation or cooperation."

The newly-released Stormont file, headed 'Proposals for cooperation arising out of meeting with Mr Lemass' contains a note from Mrs Nora Whitaker, wife of Dr Ken Whitaker, secretary to the Irish department of finance and one of Lemass's key advisers. She thanks the Stormont prime minister for "the gift you sent me by Ken... I was thrilled to be included in your thoughtfulness. It surprises me that you found time for shopping with such a historic meeting."

The core of the file is a secret note of the private discussions between the two Irish prime ministers following their informal luncheon at Stormont Castle. Forwarding the document to a Whitehall official, C.J. Bateman, secretary to the Stormont cabinet, confided: "This is not an agreed note and indeed, has been compiled from memory as we did not indulge in any notes during the talk. You will, no doubt, impress on the Home Office the confidential nature of this document." The memo records: "The discussion lasted approximately one and a quarter hours and was conducted in a most amicable atmosphere. It was fully accepted by both PMs that political and constitutional questions were not at issue. The theme was the possibility of cooperation on purely practical matters, particularly in the economic field." Apart from the two leaders, those present were Bateman, Mr K.P. Bloomfield (assistant secretary to the Stormont cabinet), Mr Jim Malley (Captain O'Neill's private secretary) and Dr T.K. Whitaker.

The main topics raised included tourism, cross-border trade, industrial development, agriculture and fisheries, educational cooperation and the problems of border areas. On tourism those present discussed "the possibility of increasing the flow of tourist traffic to both Northern Ireland and the Republic by facilitating in every way ease of travel across the border; by a measure of joint promotional effort (possibly on a British Isles basis) and by cooperation over such projects as the Shannon/Erne waterway."

The memo continues: "The possibility of promoting a further expansion of cross-border trade was discussed. Mr Lemass appreciates that external trade is a 'reserved' matter (i.e. under Westminster jurisdiction) and that most of the barriers are on his side.

Lemass admitted that southern manufacturers were not very enthusiastic about tariff reductions but 'gave the impression that further tariff reductions on Northern Ireland were very possible once the north's import surcharge was lifted."

Regarding industrial development promotion, Mr Lemass said there seemed to be cases where north and south were 'bidding' against each other. He urged some degree of common effort though the north saw an obstacle in the larger tax concessions offered to industrialists by the Republic.

Discussion also ranged over possible co-operation in agricultural research to avoid any duplication of effort. On education, "the Republic would welcome the award of university scholarships in Northern Ireland to be held at universities in the Republic and vice versa."

On the problem of assisting border areas, discussion centred on the possibility of increased use of cross-border facilities for the convenience of the public, for example attendance at cross-border schools and the treatment of accident cases in the most convenient hospital.

The historic note concludes: "No final conclusion was, of course, reached on any of these matters. The discussion was purely in the nature of a preliminary 'tour d'Horizon'. It was agreed that the two sides would exchange papers outlining matters on which they would welcome consultation and/or cooperation. Then matters agreed could be pursued at whatever level seemed appropriate, e.g. by means of individual ministers, by civil servants or by cross the table discussion."

Following the meeting, Bateman obtained from the various Stormont departments, 'heads' for possible discussion between the two governments. Not all the Stormont ministers seemed exhilarated by Captain O'Neill's initiative, however. The secretary of the Ministry of Health and Social Services reported that the Minister Mr William Morgan "is inclined to feel that, so far as his department is concerned, there are really no questions upon which he would himself wish to initiate discussion with his opposite number. Our social services generally are so far advanced in relation to the Republic that our main concern over the years has been to protect them from the incursions of the inhabitants of Eire. This has been achieved through residence tests, the safeguarding of employment and restrictions on free medical and hospital treatment." A note in the file from the Ulster agent in London must have surprised O'Neill, however. The London official reported to O'Neill's private secretary the views of the former Stormont P.M., Lord Brookeborough. These seem remarkable in view of his deserved reputation for hostility towards both the minority and the south.

Brookeborough is quoted as saying: "Had circumstances in which it was my duty to operate been those in which the prime minister is now working, I should have had no hesitation in doing what Captain O'Neill has done. I do not think either the constitution or Protestantism is threatened in any way. This is purely a question of economic welfare and the happiness of the two countries."

O'Neill opposed to opening records Captain Terence O'Neill was strongly opposed to making the north's public records more accessible to the public on the grounds that they would fuel the activities of 'political propagandists'. This is revealed in cabinet papers just released in Belfast.

On 1 December 1967, the minister of finance, Mr H. Kirk, whose remit included responsibility for the public record office of Northern Ireland, circulated a memo on the possibility of reducing the embargo on public records from 50 years to 30 in line with British practice.

Mr Kirk informed his colleagues that the U.K. government had recently decided to shorten the embargo on public documents in England and Wales except for particular classes which would be withheld for longer periods, subject to the Lord Chancellor's approval. In Northern Ireland, a 50-year rule had been in place, subject to the discretion of individual departments. However, Mr Kirk informed colleagues, two nationalist representatives, Senator Patrick McGill and the Nationalist Party leader, Mr Eddie McAteer had raised the issue in parliament. The minister went on: "I have noted that the authorities in the Republic have only recently opened the State papers up to 1916 and that they are not operating even a formal 50-year rule. It would, therefore, be feasible to continue a 50-year rule in Northern Ireland and counter criticism by saying that the situation in Northern Ireland is different from that in England and Wales, and that in Britain certain classes of material dealing with Irish affairs were excepted. From the 50-year rule for periods of up to 100 years." The minister felt, however, that the north should conform to the British model - a 30-year rule with discretion resting with the keeper of the records "who, as you know, is the minister of finance." Such a change, he suggested should be implemented without legislation to prevent the opposition claiming credit for it.

However, the minister's advice drew an angry response from the prime minister at a cabinet meeting on 7 December 1967. Captain O'Neill expressed the view that no early announcement of any change should be made. "The Republic were only releasing records up to 1916 and even in Great Britain, certain Irish records were being excepted from the rule. In his view, any clamour for access to Northern Ireland records would represent not the interests of serious historians but rather those of political propagandists."

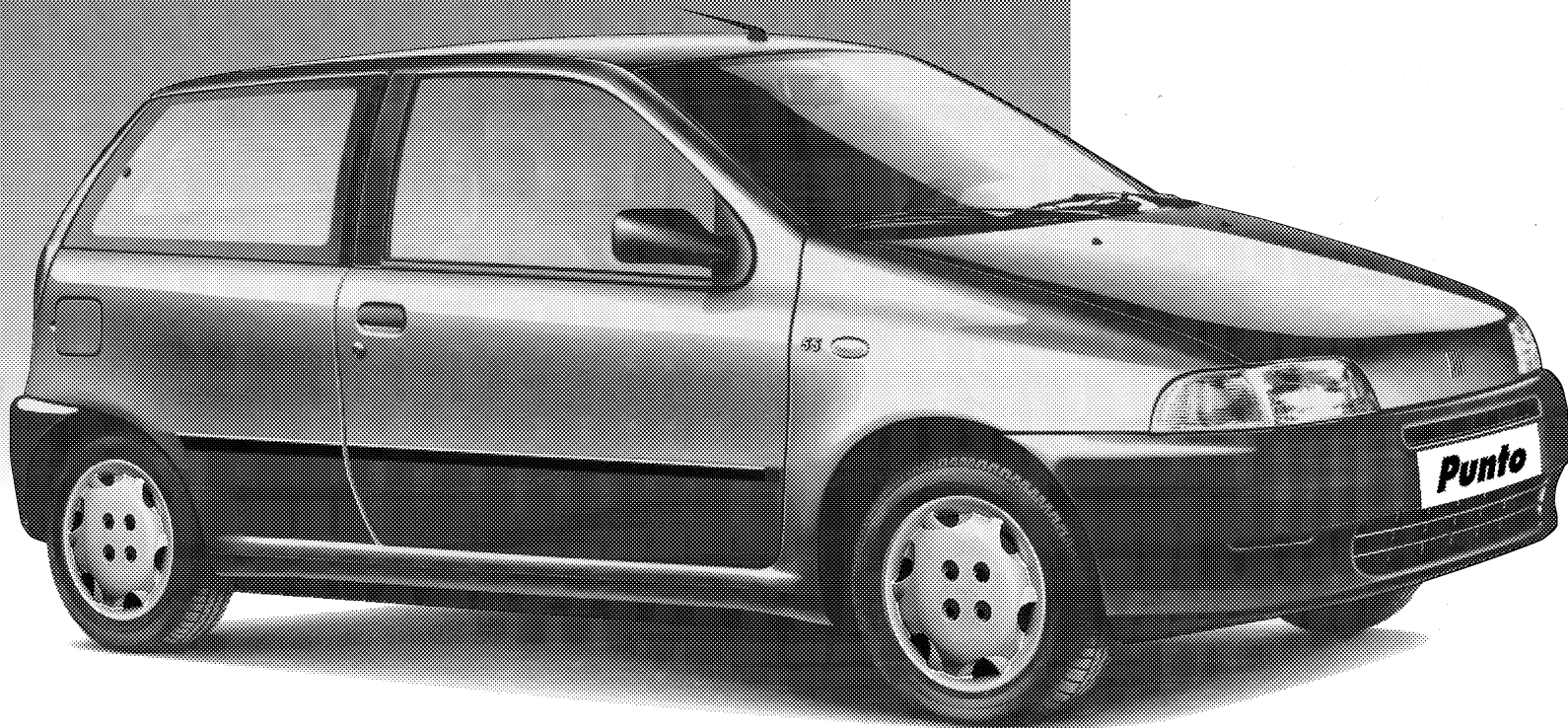
In further discussion, ministers gave general support to the prime minister's view and it was decided that no indication of any likely change in existing practice should be given.

THE Northern Ireland cabinet of 1967 was headed by Captain Terence O'Neill and included several figures destined to prominence in Unionist politics in the 1960s and 70s. These included Mr Brian Faulkner (Minister of Commerce), Mr William Craig (Minister of Home Affairs), Mr Harry West (Minister of Agriculture), Captain William Long (Minister of Education), Mr William Morgan (Minister of Health and Social Services), Mr W K Fitzsimmons (Minister for Development) and Mr E W Jones, QC (Attorney-General). O'Neill's cousin, Major James Chichester-Clarke (a future Prime Minister and now Lord Moyola) succeeded Mr West at Agriculture in April 1967.



HISTORIC MEETING... Sean Lemass and Terence O'Neill after their 1965 talks

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