



Eamon Phoenix on the latest Stormont cabinet papers released under the 30-year rule



# Ministers bid to curb nationalist discontent

THE likelihood that major concessions would have to be made to the mounting civil rights campaign was considered by the O'Neill cabinet at a meeting on November 14, 1968.

The prime minister circulated a letter from Edmond Warnock, KC, MP for St Anne's and a former attorney-general, underlining the need for amnesty for those prosecuted as a result of the civil rights march in Derry on October 5 and the urgent need for radical reform. Warnock warned Captain O'Neill the prosecution of the civil rights demonstrators would be disastrous. "It will almost certainly give new life to republicanism, it will alienate all moderate opinion in the nationalist party," he said.

Warnock, associated with the unionist right-wing in the 1950s, was openly sympathetic to the sense of injustice of the Derry marchers, telling O'Neill. "If ever a community had a right to demonstrate against a denial of civil rights, Derry is the finest example. A Roman Catholic and nationalist city has for three or four decades been administered (and none too fairly administered) by a Protestant and unionist majority, secured by manipulation of the ward boundaries for the sole purpose of retaining unionist control."

Warnock provided a personal insight into the gerrymandering of Derry in 1936. "I was consulted by Sir James Craig, Dawson Bates and R D Megaw at the time it was done. Craig thought that the fate of our constitution was on a knife edge at that time and in the circumstances, it was defensible. It was clearly understood that the arrangement was to be a temporary measure – five years was mentioned," he said.

On the question of an amnesty, Warnock acknowledged that "we have a number of hardliners in parliament but who would give a fig for the views of men like John Brooke or Desmond Boal. There is a pretty solid lot of moderates and the country should not be led to the brink of ruin by violent men again".

He urged Captain O'Neill to make a bold decision.

The former attorney's letter was raised at the cabinet meeting on November 14, 1968. The prime minister stated that before the recent meeting with Mr Wilson he had urged the need to bring to Downing Street a programme of realistic reform. The cabinet had not been able to agree to any such proposals. For his part, he was not convinced that things would settle down. It was his fear that scenes of dissension and riot would be repeated. Since the entire future of Northern Ireland was at stake, the government must take the action necessary, however unpopular.

The Minister of Agriculture Major Chichester-Clark supported Mr Warnock's view that an amnesty should be considered "in return for an undertaking by responsible nationalists to try to prevent further agitation". In the upshot it was agreed that the Minister of Home Affairs Mr Craig and the attorney-general should explore the possibility of an adjournment of the cases and that the minister of agriculture should sound out the Nationalist Chief Whip, Mr R H O'Connor about the possibility of "taking the heat out of the situation".

Turning to the long-term situation Major Chichester-Clark argued that it would be a grave mistake to view the situation purely in law and order terms. They must now consider a "package deal" which would address the situation. "So far the record had been one of too little conceded too late," he said.

"They ought now to offer, not a grudging instalment of reform, but the maximum concessions compatible with their vital political interests. The Londonderry grievances were real grievances."

The prime minister warned that further demonstrations were in prospect.

Major Chichester-Clark outlined his "package deal". This included the establishment of a commission to report on grievances.

The minister of home affairs was attracted to the idea as a device to "cool down" the current civil rights situation. Other proposed measures included the abolition of the company vote in local elections, the settling of the dispute with the Mater hospital and measures to ensure fair allocation of public housing. Ministers failed to agree on the reform of the local government franchise. The PM reminded his colleagues that their arguments in favour of the present franchise had been rejected by the British prime minister.



● BANNER HEADLINES... demonstrators march behind a banner demanding civil rights - in the centre of the crowd can be seen Paddy Devlin and to his left Gerry Fitt

# Government raises pressure for reform

AT a crucial meeting at 10 Downing Street on November 14, 1968, the British prime minister, Harold Wilson and the home secretary, Mr Jim Callaghan put immense pressure on Captain Terence O'Neill and his cabinet colleagues to introduce speedy reforms in Northern Ireland. The detailed minutes of the meeting have just been released by the PRO in Belfast under the '30 year rule'.

Mr Wilson opened the meeting by reminding the Stormont ministers that the UK government retained overriding responsibility for Northern Ireland affairs under the 1920 Act. He went on: "There was now great concern at Westminster over many aspects of the Northern Ireland scene and this embraced not only MPs but himself and his colleagues. The UK government did not need to get involved in a constitutional crisis in order to exert its will in Northern Ireland but could resort to other possibilities, for example, the financial contribution made to Northern Ireland's expenditure."

Among the matters which London found "irksome" – in Mr Wilson's phrase – were the situation in Derry and the issue of 'one man, one vote'.

The existence of the Special Powers Act had already forced the British government to seek a derogation of an international agreement on human rights. This weakened Britain's standing abroad, Mr Wilson declared.

At Westminster, the pressures for reform were increasing while in Northern Ireland, the risk of some escalation in violence had to be faced. The two governments had therefore a common interest in achieving reform fast.

The border was not an issue at all in this, said Mr Callaghan. For his part, he did not see how the prime minister



could defend at Westminster such things as the company vote and the refusal of Stormont to grant the local government vote to all over 21.

Nor did he see any escape from a 'points system' for housing. On this he hoped that Northern Ireland would not try to ignore the force of outside opinion.

The British prime minister pointed out that over the past four years his government had felt constrained not to press Captain O'Neill too hard because of the difficulties he faced, but if the liberalising trend was being retarded, they would be forced to propose a radical course involving the complete liquidation of all financial agreements with Northern Ireland.

Responding, Captain O'Neill said that when he became prime minister, he had resolved to break down the old animosities that had bedevilled Northern Ireland for generations. As a result of his actions, the police had advised him that his personal safety was at risk, not from the IRA, but from the opposite extreme.

The events in Derry on October 5



were tragic especially when community relations were improving and when an industrial break-through was imminent in the north west. Captain O'Neill pointed to the progress made in the educational sphere with the adoption of 80 per cent grants for voluntary (Catholic) schools.

The Minister of Home Affairs Brian Faulkner endorsed what Captain O'Neill had said. He hoped that British ministers would not overlook the fact that the majority of opposition MPs at Stormont were pledged to the abolition of the Northern Ireland constitution.

Turning to the Derry situation, he claimed that one third of all jobs in the past year had gone to areas west of the Bann. Neither he nor his colleagues had ever allowed political consideration to influence the location of new factories.

On the issue of the local government franchise – 'one man, one vote' – the Northern Ireland minister of home affairs, Mr William Craig said that the Stormont government were not adopting

delaying tactics but they did have to pay regard to their own position in Northern Ireland with a general election looming.

Turning to allegations of discrimination in the allocation of housing Mr Craig stressed that only a fraction of allocations caused any complaint.

As regards the Special Powers Act, he had hoped that most of its regulations could have been placed in "cold storage". Unfortunately, however, some disquieting news about IRA policy had come to light which suggested that a new campaign of violence might be launched.

Balked in its efforts to use the republican clubs as recruiting grounds by his ban, it had turned its attention to the civil rights movement.

Of 70 people in the civil rights movement, 30 were actual members or supporters of the IRA.

Responding, Mr Callaghan said he could not understand why franchise reform had to await local government re-organisation, while Mr Wilson felt that there was no justification for refusing to extend the franchise.

Moreover, if houses were distributed as fairly as suggested, then he could not see why a points system should be resisted.

In conclusion, the British prime minister raised the question of an impartial inquiry into the riot in Derry which had "upset many people" in government and parliament. If the Northern Ireland authorities were so confident that the situation had been handled properly, why were they reluctant to hold any inquiry, he asked. Before the meeting broke up, Mr Wilson impressed on the Northern Ireland ministers that it would be necessary to make further progress on the reform front quickly.

# RUC called first rights march 'IRA gathering'

AMONG the cabinet files released yesterday in Belfast is a confidential RUC report on the first civil rights march from Coalisland to Dungannon on August 24, 1968.

The report, dated August 29, was prepared for the minister of home affairs, William Craig, by the then inspector general of the RUC Mr Albert Kennedy.

The RUC chief informed Mr Craig: "It might be more correct to describe the march as a republican parade rather than a civil rights march."

"It was composed largely of Republicans and sympathisers under the command of a prominent local IRA man."

"Thomas Mitchell (IRA), an ex-Omagh raid prisoner, was also there and on the platform."

"From the conduct and behaviour of some of the speakers it is evident that the Civil Rights Organisation is allowing its platform to be used by extremists and trouble-makers for the purpose of preaching violence and stirring up hatred amongst the people."

The inspector general continued: "The speech of Mr Gerry Fitt, MP, was most provocative when he announced from the platform that the ban imposed by the police made his blood boil and called the county inspector and District Inspector 'a pair of black bastards'."

"He (Mr Fitt) went on to say that he did not fear their blackthorn sticks or batons and if it were not for the presence of women and children, he would lead the march into the Market Square."

"These utterances from Mr Fitt inflamed the crowd to such an extent that the marshals had to force them back, resulting in a number of scuffles."

The police prevented the demonstrators breaking through the RUC cordon separating 2,000 to 3, 000 civil rights marchers and 2,000 unionists who had gathered to prevent the marchers entering Market Square, Dungannon.

"At present", the RUC inspector general informed the minister, "feeling is running high in the area and it would be very easy to create an incident which could lead to serious disorder throughout the province."

"One thing certain is that the Civil Rights Organisation has set off on the wrong trend in trying to create better community relations in the Dungannon area."

"It now seems that many of those who attended the march are disillusioned and will have nothing to do with further meetings," he said.

The inspector general was especially critical of the local Nationalist Party MP for East Tyrone, Mr Austin Currie, (now a Fine Gael TD): "Mr A Currie, MP, is carefully subscribing misleading information to the press in order to serve his own purposes and policies."

"There is little doubt that he is one of the prime movers behind the upsurge of alleged discrimination in housing and employment." Mr Kennedy recalled the MP's unlawful occupation of council houses in Dungannon and Caledon.

The inspector general claimed that allegations that the police used batons or tracker dogs at the march were false.

He was especially incensed at press reports that "there is a law for Free Presbyterians and a different law for Roman Catholics", adding: "To allege a ban on the parade and a restriction on free speech is sheer nonsense."

In a detailed blow-by-blow account of the march for the information of the inspector general of the RUC, District Inspector GT Sterritt provided a detailed list of those prominent at the march.

These included, apart from Mr Currie, the Nationalist Party leader Mr Eddie McAteer, Mr Gerry Fitt, Tomas Mac Giolla (president of Sinn Fein), Miss Betty Sinclair (president of the Belfast Trades Council and a leading communist) and a number of alleged republicans and Northern Ireland Labour Party supporters.

Miss Sinclair, according to the officer, was loudly booed by a section of the marchers: "I heard cries of 'Czechoslovakia', 'Russia', and 'Jackboot'," Mr Sterritt said.

The involvement of Mr Austin Currie in the protest 'squat' in a council house at Caledon, Co Tyrone, in June 1968 is the subject of a confidential RUC report to the then minister of home affairs.

Reporting to Mr William Craig, District Inspector Sterritt recalled that "on 20 June 1968, Mr Austin Currie, accompanied by Patrick Joseph Gildernew and a Joseph Campbell forcibly entered number 9 Kinnaird Park, Caledon."

"This house had been allocated to and was occupied by a single girl, Miss Emily Beattie, and this allocation had been the subject of much discussion in the press and in parliament. Mr Currie and his two companions remained in occupation of the house some three hours until finally ejected by Miss Beattie's brother, assisted by the police," he reported.

As a result, summonses were issued on the instructions of the attorney general against Mr Currie and his colleagues.

This incident and the resulting court hearing received widespread publicity on television.

The district inspector concluded: "It will be seen that through all this agitation Mr Currie has taken a very active interest and has even gone so far as to infringe the law at Caledon."

"He believes, I think, that he is the saviour of the downtrodden in Northern Ireland and thinks that by becoming involved in this agitation he will further his political career."

"In loyalist circles in this area (east Tyrone) Mr Currie is detested and his sympathy with the Republican cause is not lost sight of."

"It has become clear that Mr Currie has aligned himself with noted republicans in this area... It is at times difficult to determine where his loyalties lie."

## Nationalists urged deal to foil militants

ON November 15, 1968, the government chief whip Major Chichester-Clark reported to the O'Neill cabinet that he had sounded out Mr Roddy O'Connor MP on the Nationalist Party's view of the current crisis and its underlying causes.

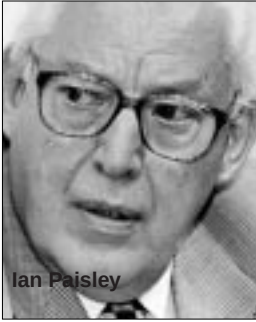
The minister reported to the cabinet that the Nationalist Party placed priority upon the issues of housing and employment.

"They would consider a settlement of the Mater (Hospital) issue very beneficial in terms of RC opinion in Belfast. In Derry, the nationalists sought some assurance that the Area Plan, which they supported, would really be put into effect. They were clearly worried about the atmosphere in Derry and anxious to contribute towards a lowering of the temperature there."

The party was concerned, he said, about losing ground to nationalist militants. If the government was to make any concessions, some degree of apparent consultation with Mr Eddie McAteer would help to strengthen the hand of the moderates on their side.

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This week, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland released to the public, under the 30-year rule, some 500 hundred cabinet files, mostly relating to 1968. A small number of files have been either fully or partially closed on grounds of sensitivity, public interest or the protection of individuals. Unusually, the record of the Northern Ireland cabinet for 1968 has been released in full.

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Foundation).

The Northern Ireland Cabinet for 1968 was headed by Captain Terence O'Neill and included several figures destined to prominence in Ulster Unionist politics in the 1960s and 70s. These included Mr Brian Faulkner (Minister of Commerce), Mr William Craig (Minister of Home Affairs), Mr Herbert Kirk (Minister of Finance), Captain William Long (Minister of Education), Major James Chichester-Clark (Minister of Agriculture), Mr William Morgan (Minister of Health and Social Services) and Major Ivan Neill (Minister of Development). Mr Basil Kelly QC was Attorney-General.

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