



Cabinet papers: 1973 in the north

By Dr Eamon Phoenix

Official suggested killing Provo

AN INSIGHT into the workings of British Intelligence in Ireland during the early 1970s is provided by confidential cabinet files released yesterday by the National Archives in London.

In a report from the British embassy in Dublin on April 9 1973, a named official described how he had suggested to a Republican sympathiser the assassination of former IRA chief of staff Sean Mac Stiofain. He also described planting stories calculated to sow dissention in the IRA in British newspapers.

In his letter from the British embassy in Dublin, the official, Peter Evans, informed Kelvin White of the Republic of Ireland department of the Foreign Office in London of his recent meeting with a man named Sean Hopkins.

Mr Hopkins had recently returned

from the US and had spent the previous week in Belfast. Mr Evans had discussed the case of Sean Mac Stiofain with Mr Hopkins and hinted in the letter at a split within the IRA.

Mr Mac Stiofain had headed an IRA delegation to the British government in London in July 1972.

He had lost faith with many Republicans after his decision to end a hunger strike and had been sentenced to six months imprisonment in Dublin in November that year.

The Dublin-based official told Mr White: "Hopkins, who supports the O'Connell faction (led by Daithi O'Connell) was much exercised about Mac Stiofain. He confirmed that Mac Stiofain would be court martialled when he was released from the Curragh. (I had got this story on to the front page of *The Daily Telegraph* ear-

lier this year), and that there was very strong pressure from Provisionals in the north for this move.

"The Dublin leadership, however, was nervous about a situation in which Mac Stiofain was 'reduced to the ranks, but left free to circulate in the south'. What were they to do?

"There was no desire to discredit Mac Stiofain or publicly to humiliate him. This would damage the movement in the eyes of its own supporters and perhaps attract a violent reaction from the wise men in the IRA who had always given Mac Stiofain their support."

Mr Evans told the Foreign Office official that Mr Hopkins had asked him what he thought the Provisionals should do.

"I said, with expressions of regret, that the best interests of the movement would only be served by killing the

man. This advice was received calmly and approvingly and I sensed that O'Connell and his associates were far from sure about the degree of support Mac Stiofain still enjoyed. Hopkins claimed he (Mac Stiofain was finished), especially as far as the north was concerned ..."

Mr Hopkins then asked Mr Evans about a story which had appeared in *The Sunday Telegraph* of April 1 of "treachery inside the Provisional movement" over the arrest of the Claudia arms ship off the Irish coast.

Mr Evans told Mr White that he had actually planted this story in the British newspaper, adding: "I hope I managed to convince him that, from my own sources, I had not the slightest doubt that the story was true."

Mr Evans further reported: "Another matter which was exercising Hopkins

was the possibility of Provisional Sinn Fein protesting the Northern elections.

"He said he thought the Provisionals were getting near to persuading Ian Paisley to support their desire to take part in the elections."

The Dublin official said that he had reminded Mr Hopkins that the Provisionals' real difficulty over the elections lay not with the British – "who would most readily respond to a ceasefire" – but within the movement itself. Mr Hopkins's prime task should be "to convince his Provisional associates of the need to stop the violence and get into the political arena".

In response, Mr Hopkins had remarked that "if the O'Connell faction in Dublin won out, (Seamus) Twomey would present no difficulty". The official took this to mean that support for Mr Mac Stiofain was wavering.



■ BORDER ISSUE: British prime minister Edward Heath was critical of inaction over IRA activity

Cosgrave met British before being sworn in

THIS year's British cabinet paper releases in London detail a meeting between British ministers and the incoming Irish coalition government in March 1973 before the formal transfer of power in Dublin had taken place.

On March 9 1973 the prime minister, Edward Heath, foreign secretary Sir Alec Douglas-Home and the defence secretary, Lord Carrington, met the incoming taoiseach Liam Cosgrave and tanaiste-elect Brendan Corish at 10 Downing Street.

Mr Cosgrave asked the prime minister to repeat the assurance that the nationalist minority in the north would have an effective share of power. There was a danger that, even if they were represented on the executive, they could still be "overruled by the majority", he said.

Mr Heath said the UK government intended to propose that the executive could not be based upon any single party drawing its support from one section of a divided community.

On security, Mr Heath said the British and Irish governments had a common interest in bringing violence to an end. He dismissed allegations that the army in Northern Ireland was not wholly impartial.

A special corps had recently been set up to bring to book those respon-

sible for sectarian murders. Since Operation Motorman (August 1972), 13 Protestants had been charged with sectarian murders, he said.

Turning to the impending publication of the British government's White Paper on reform in the north, Mr Heath said it was possible that there would be "a complete breakdown of normal life in Northern Ireland for a time after the White Paper was published, and that there would be extensive industrial action by Protestant workers".

However, the British government was prepared to face up to this and press ahead with its proposals.

As far as the border was concerned, Mr Heath went on, it had been the practice for senior people concerned with intelligence in Northern Ireland to maintain contacts with their opposite numbers in the south. In certain border areas. However, cooperation was not yet sufficient and IRA units operating from the south had been responsible for at least 37 deaths. These activities could best be dealt with by coordinated action.

Lord Carrington said press reports that servicemen in plain clothes had been responsible for assassinations were wholly without foundation.

Mr Cosgrave said he was not in a position to reply to Mr Heath's

request for further cooperation until his government had taken up office. He was, however, willing in principle to do more on security. He would find it easier to do so, however, if it were possible to give the minority community in the north greater confidence in the impartiality of the RUC.

Mr Corish said the IRA was more readily able to justify its actions when it could point to the number of weapons in Protestant hands. However, Mr Heath said that "the extreme Protestants could not be regarded as being on all fours with the IRA" while the British army had taken a firm line against them.

Turning to the Council of Ireland, Mr Cosgrave said he would like it to deal with substantial subjects such as tourism and regional development. There was a common interest in securing maximum support for the north west of Ireland from the European Community's Regional Development Fund.

The prime minister said he was willing to put Mr Cosgrave's preference for a north-south council to his cabinet colleagues.

However, so long as abnormal law and order conditions existed, his administration would not contemplate sharing responsibility for security with any assembly in the north.

Congratulations on Claudia but rap over Garda inaction

THE delighted reaction of the British prime minister, Edward Heath, to the capture of an IRA arms ship in March 1973 is highlighted in confidential Whitehall papers just released by the National Archives in London. On March 28 1973, Irish defence forces intercepted the Cyprus-registered Claudia off the Co Waterford coast, capturing 500 weapons and explosives as well as the then IRA chief of staff, Joe Cahill. Irish defence minister Patrick Donegan personally supervised the forces used and declared that he had given the IRA "a kick up the transom". Mr Cahill was subsequently sentenced to three years imprisonment by the Special Criminal Court.

In a letter to taoiseach Liam Cosgrave on April 2 1973 Mr Heath wrote: "I should like to express my personal congratulations to you on the successful interception of the Claudia. The determined and decisive action taken by your government and the skill with which your forces carried out the operation, have made a deep impression in Britain and in Northern Ireland. I very

much hope that the cooperation between us, on political as well as security matters, will continue as successfully as it has begun." Mr Heath then raised the issue of the activities of IRA active service units (ASUs) along the border and said he was sending details of these to the taoiseach with the British ambassador. Referring to previous British experience, he said: "I am bound to say that we were not happy with the response we had in the past to the representations we made to your predecessors (the Jack Lynch-led Fianna Fail administration which had lost office in March 1973). There is ample evidence that a number of ASUs have hitherto been able to operate openly from the Republic with little or no hindrance from the local gardai..." He said he believed "that effective action along the border will greatly help north and south to move towards a close relationship." He suggested that, on the security front, "some system, however discreetly practised, is necessary" and proposed to charge a junior minister at the NIO to liaise with the Dublin authorities.

Killers' letter to taoiseach

IN December 1973 the taoiseach, Liam Cosgrave, received a letter from the so-called 'Ulster Assassination Squad' informing him that its truce would end on December 12. The letter stated: "To date the UAS has claimed the lives of 27, two of whom were women. This decision has been taken as the direct result of the British government's policy on Ulster."

Cooperation on IRA gun-running ship

IN WHAT signalled a dramatic increase in north/south security cooperation in 1973, the Irish government of Liam Cosgrave arranged to send samples of the arms captured on the Claudia gun-running ship to Belfast for examination. This is revealed in a previously secret despatch from Sir Arthur Galsworthy, the British ambassador in Dublin, to the Foreign Office dated April 14 1973.

Sir Arthur reported that the Irish minister for defence, Patrick Donegan, had come to see him the previous day to discuss the fate of the Claudia arms, intended for the IRA.

"He said he had been instructed by the taoiseach (Mr Cosgrave) to provide us with the Claudia arms, which we wanted. He stressed that Mr Cosgrave wanted this to be done very discreetly and on the basis that, if questioned, the Irish would deny that they

It was because publicity would be politically embarrassing to any Irish government that they did not want to be quoted in a demarche to the Russians about the Claudia arms

had made them over to us. He hoped we would do the same."

It was arranged that the British ambassador's military attaché would collect the arms from the Irish army chief of staff in Dublin and take them by car to Lisburn.

Turning to the British government's request for greater cross-border security cooperation, Mr Donegan said that the taoiseach had been "most receptive" to the idea and that "the Irish authorities would do everything they could to stop bad hats operating in the border areas".

He said the reason that Irish troops kept one mile back from the border was because of the risk of British and Irish army units firing at each other "which, he said, would delight the IRA". Sir Arthur pointed out that what the British were seeking was "concerted

action to deal firmly with the terrorists whose names and areas of operation were well known".

The ambassador told London: "The minister's enthusiasm for clobbering the IRA is to be encouraged."

However, Mr Donegan had repeatedly stressed the need for cooperation on security matters to remain confidential.

"It was because publicity would be politically embarrassing to any Irish government that they did not want to be quoted in a demarche to the Russians about the Claudia's arms."

Mr Donegan said the Irish authorities hoped to "pick up" leading IRA figure David O'Connell and would be watching "Sean Stevenson (Sean Mac Stiofain) closely in order to pick him up again at the first footfault".