

Northern Ireland
CABINET PAPERS

1975

Senior unionists 'anxious' for broker to talk to nationalists

THE role of former Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble in efforts to reach a political agreement in 1975 are highlighted in this year's Stormont releases.

In a memo prepared for the use of Northern Ireland Convention officials on September 30 1975, Professor Bernard Crick, the eminent political scientist, explained that he had been approached over the summer by the UUUC Convention party to advise on committee systems.

"At first I took no notice... since the invitation was vague and eccentric. But at the beginning of September David Trimble wrote me sensibly and at some length and William Craig phoned me and explained the situation. I agreed to go out to discuss with them a document on minority participation.

He stated that he reserved his right to talk to people he knew in the SDLP.

"Far from this being an obstacle", Prof Crick continued, "when I first met Craig and his colleagues in the week of the September 8 it became clear that Craig was anxious that I should talk to SDLP leaders and others.

"And I returned for the week of Monday September 22 and again had long talks with Craig, Trimble, Fitt, Hume, Devlin and others."

He also spoke to the convention chairman Sir Robert Lowry and his advisers.

Prof Crick stated that he had talked to West and Paisley during the week before Craig's voluntary coalition motion was voted down by the 'Unionist coalition'.

He added: "Subsequently I have stayed in touch with Craig - being convinced of his sincerity - and seen more of the SDLP and have been... welcomed by them precisely because I have been talking to Craig."

He was convinced that the convention was "worthwhile" and that even now an agreement might emerge, given the right tactics. However, "rumours or fears of British withdrawal" were working against an agreed settlement.



■ **IRA CAMPAIGN:** According to one British government adviser unionists' thinking in 1975 was dominated by fears that Britain planned to pull out of the north following republican attacks on England, including the Birmingham pub bombings in 1974

He had formed the impression that the SDLP leaders were able to trust Craig and would accept his "emergency coalition formula".

They had also gone "very far in allaying old Unionist fears about Irish unity and Craig appreciated this".

He concluded: "Power-sharing does stick in the Unionist gullet,

coalition not. The SDLP are getting wise to this - Devlin and Fitt certainly - but Hume is still a bit mystical about power-sharing."

The SDLP's major difficulty was in "carrying home to their people a prize big enough to cut away tolerance of the IRA".

Fears of British pull-out dominated the unionist mind, according

to Prof Crick.

"Everywhere I was asked, 'does the British government intend to pull out?' I replied that I thought most people in Britain wished the whole of Ireland would sink under the waves but that a pull-out before an acceptable government had been created was inconceivable.

"I saw no positive evidence of any

strong public opinion for withdrawal, even after Birmingham," Prof Crick concluded.

■ **Dr Eamon Phoenix is principal lecturer in history at Stranmillis University College, Belfast and author of Northern Nationalism: Nationalist Politics, Partition and the Catholic Minority in Northern Ireland.**

Convention achieved little

Following the winding up of the Northern Ireland Convention in November 1975, a key Stormont official produced an incisive critique of its stormy six-month history. In his assessment, Dr Maurice Hayes noted that "on the credit side, the convention ran its full term of six months without walk-out, breakdown or public altercation". In view of the stormy life of the power-sharing assembly the previous year, "this was at least something". However, Dr Hayes continued: "There was little real dialogue in the convention. The final proposals of parties, reflected in the draft report, show little, if any, shift from the election manifestos. At all the set-piece debates, party spokesmen reiterated their manifesto position. There was some

interchange between party delegations in the inter-party talks, but little mixing across the floor between back benchers. The UUUC parties in particular were suspicious of another Sunningdale and had pledged themselves to open discussions and open agreements."

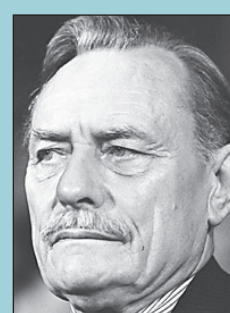
On the talks between the UUUC and SDLP in August 1975, which had briefly offered a glimmer of hope in the shape of voluntary coalition, Dr Hayes felt that the parties should have sought to establish broad areas of agreement on subsidiary issues while holding the main questions in suspension. "However, the parties disdained the foothills and aspired to the pinnacles. They made a rapid dash to the north face of the Eiger and not surprisingly stuck there."

'No will' to continue body

Unionist Leader Demanded 'Pre-1968 Stormont' in 1975

In a note on a file on the 1975 Stormont convention, just released in Belfast, an official reported on a talk with Official Unionist leader Harry West on the likely outcome of the forthcoming convention. Mr R H Blackburn reported that the unionist leader had visited him to protest about the numbers of staff being taken on for the convention. In West's view, they would not be needed as the convention would last only six weeks.

The UUUC would use their majority to vote through (1) a return to a pre-1968 Stormont, (2) the return of local government to the pre-reform structure of the 1960s, and (3) the increase of the north's Westminster MPs



to 21. Mr West said the former Conservative minister and South Down MP Enoch Powell, left, "had advised them that the British government would not accept this but they were not going to take his advice. He did not see why

the convention should be kept going to allow SDLP and Alliance to make speeches denigrating Ulster. "They must be stopped and given no voice in affairs at all."