

CABINET PAPERS – COMPILED BY EAMON PHOENIX

BELFAST

End to ill-fated Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention noted

In our second day of coverage of Dublin and Belfast government papers for 1976, Dr Eamon Phoenix looks at issues including the peace people, the end of the Northern Ireland Convention, the disastrous state of the economy and civil rights marches



THE winding-up of the ill-fated Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention of 1975-76 is detailed in this year's release of previously confidential Cabinet files in Belfast.

On March 4 1976 the then secretary of state, Merlin Rees, wrote formally to the chairman of the convention, Sir Robert Lowry on the failure of the body to reach agreement on a cross-community administration.

Despite the decision of the Unionist majority in the convention to produce a report demanding old-style Stormont majority rule in October 1976, Mr Rees had recalled the body for a four-week period in February 1976 to consider whether a system of cross-community government was still a possibility.

The secretary of state told Lowry: "The report of the inter-party talks and of the debates which have taken place have made it plain that no progress has been made, or is likely to be made, in the convention on reaching agreement on proposals which would command sufficiently widespread acceptance throughout the community in Northern Ireland to provide stable and effective government."

In these circumstances, Mr Rees



■ DISSOLUTION: Merlin Rees

wrote, he had advised Queen Elizabeth to dissolve the convention under the powers contained in the Northern Ireland Act of 1974.

Mr Rees took the opportunity to express the Labour government's appreciation of Sir Robert's 'impartiality and independence' as chairman of the convention.

In a detailed report sent to Mr Rees on March 4, 1976 Sir Robert Lowry noted the dissolution of the

Convention and outlined its failure to reach a consensus.

He recalled holding 13 meetings with the separate parties before the

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first meeting of the reconvened Convention on February 3 1976.

In all these discussions the UUUC had acted as a group and their three leaders, Harry West (Ulster Unionist Party), William Craig (Vanguard Unionist Party) and Rev Ian Paisley (Democratic Unionist Party) as a single team.

The background to the inter-party talks had been extremely difficult, Lowry told Mr Rees: "The talks were carried on in the midst of mounting violence. Forty-six people died in

the month of January and violence continued unabated in February. In common with the community at large, members suffered attacks on their lives and property.

"At the same time the parties were meeting against the background of growing economic crisis in the UK as a whole.

"Unemployment increased daily with factory closures in their local areas. Despite these handicaps, the talks were conducted in a dignified and courteous atmosphere in which, however, the existence of substantial agreement on many aspects of the Report could not conceal the extent of disagreement on a fundamental issue."

After three weeks of talks, on February 23 1976 the party leaders had informed the chairman that further discussions 'would be of no avail'.

Sir Robert paid tribute to the dignity of the parties and said the talks had been 'devoid of acrimony'.

"Parties held strongly to their declared views and expressed them in unambiguous terms. That they failed to reach agreement reflects the intractability of the problem rather than any lack of concern or commitment on their part," he said.

'Security forces incapable of defeating the Provos'

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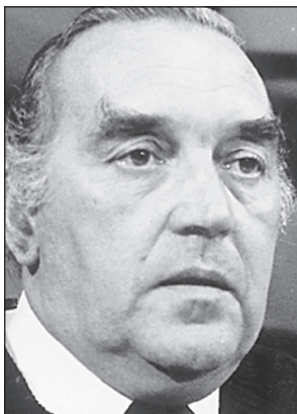
This was the grim conclusion of senior Stormont officials in December 1976 despite the abolition of special category status for paramilitary prisoners and the emergence of the peace people.

The issue of Special Category status dominated several meetings of senior civil servants at Stormont during 1976.

At a meeting of officials on March 2, the permanent under secretary at the Northern Ireland Office, Sir Frank Cooper, warned that there were limited grounds for optimism on the security front following the death of the IRA hunger striker, Frank Stagg in Britain and the ending of special category status for members of the IRA and loyalist groups.

In light of Cooper's security assessment, his colleagues discussed 'the need to adhere firmly to the decision to end special category status' and to implement measures for the security of government buildings.

On July 7, the Stormont committee discussed the level of violence under the



from British army sources. (This was to be the last meeting of the committee attended by Brian Cubbon

were interested in better representation at Westminster.

The point was made that

"It is often said that the English do not really understand the Irish. There is some truth in this, although it can equally be said that the Irish do not always set a very good example of understanding one another"

Roy Mason, left

chairmanship of the new NIO permanent under secretary, Mr B C Cubbon.

The minutes record the gravity of his assessment: "Any admission by the government that it was unable effectively to reduce the level of violence in the face of increasing threats against community workers and businessmen could be extremely dangerous. It had to be recognised that there was a steady erosion of confidence and a diminution in the stability of society."

The permanent secretary at commerce, Mr Bell referred to press reports of shopkeepers being subjected to financial extortion.

It was suggested that these reports emanated

who was seriously wounded in the IRA bomb explosion which assassinated the British Ambassador to Ireland, Christopher Ewart-Biggs and a female secretary at Sandyfort, Co Dublin on July 21 1976.)

At a final meeting of the committee on December 7 1976 the pessimism of senior officials at the worsening security situation was clear.

"It seemed that the security forces were incapable of defeating the Provos. The only other answer lay in their supporters growing weary of them," according to the minutes.

The people of Northern Ireland were not really concerned at the absence of devolved government but

if direct rule ministers and the secretary of state were to carry any real conviction with the people of the north, "there was a need for them to become less remote".

The file contains a speech delivered to local journalists by Roy Mason on November 26 1976 in which he said: "It is often said that the English do not really understand the Irish."

"There is some truth in this, although it can equally be said that the Irish do not always set a very good example of understanding one another."

He suggested that the time was ripe for devolution, given the discussions on devolved government for Scotland and Wales.

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