

STATE PAPERS: NORTHERN IRELAND

Integrated education promoted

AMONG the cabinet papers is the British Labour government's 'behind the scenes' involvement in the successful passage of a private member's bill at Westminster promoting integrated education.

The bill was introduced in the House of Lords by Alliance peer Lord Dunleath and became law in May 1978.

It provided for the establishment of 'controlled integrated schools' with full state funding provided this was the desire of the school management committee and a majority of parents.

AT A GLANCE...

The Labour government of 1978 said it did not intend to be obstructive to legislation promoting integrated education in the north

At a meeting of officials at Stormont on November 28 1977 it was made clear that the government would not oppose the bill and that NIO education minister Lord Melchett did not intend to be obstructive.

The file reveals the involvement of the late Co Leitrim-based peer Lord John Kilbracken of Killegar, in shaping the bill.

A journalist by profession, Lord Kilbracken had renounced his British citizenship following the events of Bloody Sunday five years earlier.

There are shades of the present furore over educational reform in the confidential files.

The proposed abolition of the 11-plus and the restructuring of secondary education dominated a meeting of the Policy Coordinating Committee

at Stormont on March 1 1978.

One A Brooke reported to the meeting the views of the education minister on the subject.

The British government, he said, was not seeking a confrontation on this issue and believed that it would be better not to act precipitously.

The government had laid down only one condition – that there should not be selection at eleven-plus – he added.

The question of selection at a later age had not been ruled out.



■ INTENTION: Lord Melchett



■ RELEASED:

Some of the files released by the British government this week under the 30-year rule

Discrimination and intimidation at Ford factory

ALLEGATIONS of anti-Catholic discrimination and the intimidation of Protestants at the Ford factory in Dunmurry, Co Antrim, are revealed in previously confidential files released by the Public Record Office.

In March 1977 unionist mayor of Lisburn, Councillor N Bicker, voiced concern to NIO junior minister Don Concannon about intimidation of Protestant workers at the plant. He alleged that Ford originally had a 50/50 workforce but that it was now 70 per cent Catholic.

Meanwhile, JS Crozier, a Stormont official contacted the Fair Employment Agency chairman Bob Cooper about the allegations.

However, Mr Cooper replied that the FEA had decided not to undertake an investigation at Ford at the prompting of its Catholic members.

"The latter", according to Mr Cooper, "apparently consider that Ford's management has been completely non-discriminatory and feel it would be unfair to be seen as picking on an obviously 'good' company".

However, problems continued to develop at the US-owned plant. On October 10 1977 a Stormont official, PWJ Buxton, met two managers at the Ford plant.

They relayed their concern that several workers who were part-time members of the security forces had been threatened and had subsequently left the firm.

In regard to the allegations of sectarian discrimination at Ford, the firm accepted that the ratio was 90 per cent Protestant in the skilled sector but was closer to 60/40 in unskilled jobs.

In October 1977 the issue was taken up by the secretary of state who observed that "intimidation can be very serious for the future of USA investment in Northern Ireland".

He wondered what action could be taken in respect of Ford's. This led to an investigation of the situation at the plant.

On December 5 1977 Mr Buxton informed the secretary of state that the plant was close to Catholic west Belfast and "for at least a year the Provisionals have been mounting operations to intimidate, if not kill, part-time members of the security forces who worked there".

Community relations had deteriorated because of this.

Mr Buxton noted that the FEA was aware of the position and were likely to mount an investigation into allegations that Catholics were not being promoted to higher grades.

The result was a meeting between the chairman of the FEA and Mr Concannon on January 17 1978 to discuss intimidation at the Ford plant.

The minister remarked that this was a difficult matter as Ford was one of the "shining examples" he had spoken of on his promotional trips and one which had avoided sectarian strife at its Northern Ireland plant.

"Any adverse publicity arising from the FEA study would have repercussions for the overseas image of Northern Ireland."

Mr Cooper explained that the FEA would not be looking at Ford in isolation and that "it was interesting that three out of five major engineering works in Belfast did not employ any Catholics at all and at least one, Sirrocco [in east Belfast] seemed to be relatively keen to alter this position."

Responding, Mr Concannon said he was very much opposed to reports which highlighted the religious pattern in employment.

However, Mr Cooper argued that there was a need for such reports to identify the "scale" of the problem before finding a solution.

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