

1979 STATE PAPERS



■ **DODGE:** Cases of whiskey were marked 'furniture'

Bootlegging by Irish diplomats

By Colm Kelpie PA

IRISH diplomats in Saudi Arabia smuggled in alcohol concealed as furniture to dodge the Islamic state's drink ban, files released by the Department of Foreign Affairs in Dublin reveal.

The embassy in Jeddah used an Italian company to secretly ship in cases of wine and whiskey.

The then ambassador, Eamon O Tuathail, insisted that cargo documents be marked "preserves or furniture" to throw police off the scent, as Saudi officers were posted on security outside his home and office.

He wrote to the Irish embassy in

"While it would be pleasant to have an odd drink oneself, I am concerned that we may have a ministerial visit"

Ambassador Eamon O Tuathail

Rome to arrange the shipments, claiming that Trieste-based firm Alberti was the only one willing to falsify documents.

"As usual, Alberti should arrange that the boxes inside the containers should be sealed and have no

indication on the outside as to contents," he wrote to official Billy Hawkes in Rome in February 1978.

"The shipping documents should show 'furniture'.

"We now have the police sitting outside both the office and residence!"

Mr O Tuathail said the embassy needed to stock up in case a government minister visited.

"While it would be pleasant to have an odd drink oneself, I am concerned that we may have a ministerial visit either before or after the summer," he wrote in May 1977.

"For that we need liquor. Most Saudis expect to be served alcohol

at diplomatic receptions."

A handwritten note added: "Ministers also like to be served liquor!"

Mr O Tuathail said authorities turned a blind eye to diplomatic imports of drink provided that there was no mention of the contents on the shipping documents.

In the 1978 letter in the National Archives he referred to three payments for furniture costs from separate bank accounts totalling \$13,375.

Saudi Arabia bans the production, importation or consumption of alcohol and imposes tough penalties – including imprisonment and public floggings – on those who flout the rules.

'Do not empower councils' warning

THE Thatcher government was warned by a leading Stormont official in 1979 that any return of major powers such as housing allocation to local government in the north would be disastrous to a long-term settlement.

In the late 1970s the Ulster Unionists under James Molyneux pressed Westminster to introduce a new tier of local government in Northern Ireland with real powers.

However, in a trenchant memo to direct-rule ministers on November 7 1979 senior Stormont official Ken Bloomfield (now Sir Kenneth) warned that the issue of discrimination in local government had "not gone away".

Writing to the permanent under-secretary at the NIO, Sir Brian Cubbon, he highlighted the role of discrimination at council level in the outbreak of the Troubles in 1968.

"No-one who has lived through the recent history of Northern Ireland can fail to be aware that discrimination in local government contributed to the origins of our present disturbances," Sir Kenneth wrote.

"Such discrimination was not universal and its extent of impact were frequently exaggerated; but the basic judgment of the [1960] Cameron Commission that discrimination by some local authorities, particularly in the areas of council employment and housing, contributed significantly to a build-up of resent-

ment remains valid."

In his view, to avoid a recurrence, the British government had acted to withdraw functions from local government and transferring them to central government or statutory bodies and by providing a series of specific remedies against religious and political discrimination.

Sir Kenneth warned that any attempt to widen the responsibilities of councils "could involve a return to old evils".

While some councils had sought consensus, others appeared to have learnt nothing over the last 10 years.

"Blatantly offensive sectarian and political statements continue to be made by a minority of councillors," Sir Kenneth wrote.

"There continue to be allegations that particular council appointments have been made or not made for reasons of discrimination."

Thus, he wrote, on a policy issue like the creation of a new Catholic housing estate at Poleglass in the Lisburn council area, "there tends to be a competition in comparative obduracy".

Sir Kenneth concluded that "the impact of unchanged attitudes on restored powers could be disastrous".

■ Dr Eamon Phoenix is principal lecturer in history at Stranmillis University College Belfast and the author of *Northern Nationalism 1890-1940* and *A Century of Northern Life: The Irish News and 100 Years of Ulster History*.



■ **UNEARTHED:** Gavin McMahon looks through the newly released files at the Public Records Office in Belfast

PICTURE: Colm O'Reilly

Secret brief for secretary of state

ONE file made public contains confidential briefing material for the incoming Conservative secretary of state, Humphrey Atkins, in May 1979.

It contains a potted history of Northern Ireland from 1920 to the escalating H-Block protest and informs the new minister that from December 1978 "350 PIRA prisoners at Her Majesty's Prison Maze have been engaged in a defiant campaign for POW status".

In a media survey *The Irish News*, then edited by Terry O'Keefe, is described as "widely read by Catholics" with a circulation of 49,000. According to the brief, "its journalistic quality is generally low and it is vulnerable from the Provisional IRA and other republican groups, not necessarily because of its sympathy with extremists but to minimise intimidation and keep its premises intact."

The *News Letter* was "pro-union and loyalist with little sympathy for power-sharing" while the now defunct *Irish Press* was "an aggressive, hard-line pro-republican newspaper" that backed Fianna Fail. Books recommended to the minister included *The Orange State* by former civil rights leader Michael Farrell and Andrew Boyd's classic work on Belfast riots, *Holy War in Belfast*.