

STATE PAPERS Belfast and Dublin

Robinson touted as 'Ulster PM' in a united Ireland

A 1986 memo conjures the notion of Peter Robinson as an 'Ulster PM' within a federal united Ireland by the 1990s. In a long letter from Dublin to British foreign secretary Geoffrey Howe in November that year, Sir Alan Goodison recalled how his role was a complex one: "As in many countries... once ruled from, London, the representative of her majesty [is] admired, envied and sometimes reviled." The taoiseach and joint architect of the Anglo-Irish Agreement Garret Fitzgerald was, he noted, "a man of mixed heritage, northern and southern, Protestant and Catholic" who had worked along lines which "made sense to British ministers". As a result, the 1985 agreement was signed and as long as it held, "no system of exclusive Protestant rule in the north can ever again be acceptable" while the Republic could not impose its will on Northern Ireland. Dr Fitzgerald's rival and successor as taoiseach, Charles Haughey, had told Mr Goodison privately that the agreement was "a remarkable

achievement". If it were to collapse under unionist pressure, Mr Goodison felt that a British withdrawal from the north was a possibility, not immediately but in the 1990s. He went on: "There are already northern Protestant leaders who seem to want this and whose tactics – and personalities – are alienating the British electorate from willingness to sacrifice more British lives and British money in an attempt to secure a decent life in NI." It was possible that Mr Haughey and his like would make common cause with loyalist forces to establish a federalist form of Irish unity. The ambassador told Mr Howe: "He has hinted to me... that he would pay a great deal in terms of Protestant hegemony in the north. But this is to ignore two problems – the IRA and money. Would the old gang bury their weapons at Mr Peter Robinson's inauguration at the head of an Ulster administration in a United Ireland? It appears improbable. Would the English pay a penny to

sustain it. I do not know." If a British withdrawal were to take place, Mr Goodison told the foreign secretary "the consequences would not necessarily be as bad as (followed British) withdrawal from Palestine" in 1948 though, no doubt, Britain would have to cope with an exodus of refugees. He felt these could be easily assimilated in Britain. In Northern Ireland, he conceded, "blood may very well flow, but with no-one to hold the ring, the Irish... might come more easily to terms with one another". The retiring British ambassador stressed that he was not advocating withdrawal as he was "afraid of civil war". But he felt continued unionist inflexibility would try British patience: "I simply think that in the end the British are going to find the unionists too unpalatable to stomach and are going to leave them to stew in their own juice. If anything is going to lead to the dissolution of the UK, I believe it will be the obstinacy of the northern Protestants and not passionate nationalism."



MEMO: DUP members Peter Robinson and Cedric Wilson pictured protesting at Stormont

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