



ARK Feature

‘Not a snowball or protestor in sight! When a Taoiseach visits Belfast...’

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On Friday 8 June 2018 Leo Varadkar, then Taoiseach (Irish Prime Minister) made another of his visits north of the border. This one however took on slightly more significance in that one of his engagements involved a visit to the headquarters of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland in the heart of loyalist/unionist East Belfast. In line with current practice the media had been informed in advance of this engagement and people were therefore able to sit back and wait to see how events unfolded. One of the most notable images of the day was undoubtedly the sight of the Taoiseach paying his respect at a memorial to commemorate members of the Orange Order killed during the ‘Troubles’ which helped to reinforce the message of goodwill and reconciliation that Varadkar was attempting to portray. Another notable feature was the warm welcome the Taoiseach was to receive as he left for his next scheduled event. No one seemingly objected to his presence, nor did he encounter some of the problems his predecessors had faced when they had chosen to come to Belfast.

All of this brought into focus the complete contrast in the way that Varadkar’s visit was planned and managed with the meeting at Stormont on 14th January 1965 between Captain Terence O’Neill, then Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, and Sean Lemass, then Taoiseach. Much of what was to happen is already in the public domain through various books, television programmes

and personal testimony, but it is also always interesting to look at such events through the archival material of the time.

Since 2011 Conflict Archive on the INternet (CAIN <http://www.ark.ac.uk/cain>) and the National Archives, Ireland (NAI) have worked together to make available a small selection of digital versions of Irish government records held by the NAI. The records selected by CAIN are ones which relate to the conflict and politics in Northern Ireland, and currently these cover the period 1965 to 1985. In total there are 2,720 records and these cover a wide range of topics including a number relating to the O’Neill – Lemass meeting in January 1965. From these one can not only ascertain a glimpse behind the scenes of the secrecy and sensitivity of the event itself, but also how things were done in a different era compared to the world of today with its fixation on the 24 hour news agenda and public relations.

The first recorded note of the preliminaries involved in setting up the get-together between the two prime ministers comes early in January 1965. A note prepared for Lemass on 4th January 1965 informs him that J.M. Malley, then O’Neill’s Private Secretary, is in Dublin and:

“..wishes to convey to you a personal message from Captain O’Neill to the effect that...a fresh approach should be made in the matter of cooperation between the two parts of Ireland.”

This was accompanied with an invitation for Lemass and his wife to visit Belfast¹. The following day T.K. Whitaker, then Secretary of the Department of Finance, and a close confidant of Lemass, wrote back to Malley. He confirmed the Taoiseach’s interest in travelling north of the border to meet O’Neill in order to discuss the, *‘possibilities of practical co-operation in matters of mutual interest’*, and for the Northern Ireland Prime Minister to make a return visit to Dublin. From this note it would appear that Lemass would have been happy to see the press notified on the night before his visit North in order for it to make the newspaper². However the reply from Malley to Whitaker indicated that Belfast was much more cautious. Instead the suggestion was made that no announcement should be made until Lemass had arrived in order to ensure that, *‘there will be no incitement to extremists of any ilk to make public protests’*. Furthermore the sense of unease about the visit is clear from the fact that Malley finishes the letter by stating, *‘Please excuse the untidy writing but my confidential Typist is having a day’s leave and I did not wish to use any other’*³. In the end the wishes of those in Belfast prevailed and the official press release was embargoed until 1pm on Thursday 14th January 1965.⁴

As Whitaker was to recall that decision was not something he agreed with. However the need to maintain silence prior to the trip north was later to offer him an

opportunity to recount some of the challenges he had subsequently to face at that time. In a piece written for a BBC (Schools) Northern Ireland in 1975 marking the Lemass – O’Neill meeting he recalls the, *‘excitement of the visit itself’*, and of, *‘the secrecy desired by the Northern Premier’*, resulting in the, *‘minor thrill – of a James Bond kind’*, of trying to ensure he was not responsible for the news leaking out. Apart from his wife he told no-one, and even the Gárda (Irish police) escort who were to accompany him and Lemass to the Border were not informed of their ultimate destination.

However that morning there was almost a crisis situation in the Whitaker household when a police car arrived at his door early to collect him:

*“There was a knock on the halldoor about a quarter to nine and one of my sons came in breathless to say there was “a Gárda car at the door and they were looking for Daddy”. I went out quickly and told them to park around the block and come back in half an hour. I forgot what explanation I gave to the children but they seemed relieved that I wasn’t being arrested”.*⁵

After that problematic start to the day, Whitaker recalls that the trip to Belfast went smoothly and on arrival they found that the ‘atmosphere was most friendly’. In addition:

*“Our hosts thought the occasion worthy of champagne...(but) I imagine Dr Paisley’s worst fears would be confirmed if I were to say that the red wine we drank was Chateauneuf du Pape!”*⁶

Whitaker was however to be more business-like in the memorandum he was to draw up on the 15th January 1965 which provides the official record of the day. After the initial meeting lunch was served the two Prime Ministers and their officials took a short walk from O’Neill’s official residence to his office where a, *‘large number of photographers and some pressmen were at the door’*. As anticipated the discussions that followed focussed on exploring the, *‘possibilities of practical co-operation in the interests of the whole of Ireland’*. These included matters such as tourism, education, health, industrial promotion, agricultural research, trade, electricity, administrative problems, transport, fisheries and game protection, and justice. The day

ended with afternoon tea, a meeting with some of O’Neill’s cabinet - who had been kept completely in the dark about the Lemass visit – and a commitment that O’Neill would shortly pay a return visit to Dublin⁷.

With regards the future Lemass was to be careful not to make any rash predictions. At a press briefing in Government Buildings in Dublin on 16th January he stressed that, *‘no political issues of any kind were touched upon’*, and that the talks concentrated, *‘only with practical measures which can result in advantages for ordinary Irish people... wherever they live in Ireland’*. Later when questioned as to whether, *‘a state of cold war had been replaced by a state of warm friendship’*, between the two parts of Ireland he simply replied, *‘Yes: things can never be the same again’*.⁸ As for Whitaker writing on the tenth anniversary of the visit, his memories were to be a poignant mixture of satisfaction but also a sense of sadness at how events were soon to evolve in Ireland:

*“...good-byes were said about 5.00 p.m. We started back with new hopes in our hearts. We had no presentment of the tragic events of 1969 and the years since.”*⁹

Notes

Dr Brendan Lynn is currently deputy director on the Conflict Archive on the INternet (CAIN) website: <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/>. Further resources and information relating to the content of this feature can be found at: <http://cain.ulster.ac.uk/nai/index.html>

Footnotes:

1. http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/nai/1965/nai_TSCH-98-6-429_1965-01-04.pdf
2. http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/nai/1965/nai_TSCH-98-6-429_1965-01-05.pdf
3. http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/nai/1965/nai_TSCH-98-6-429_1965-01-11.pdf
4. http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/nai/1965/nai_TSCH-98-6-429_1965-01-14_d.pdf
5. http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/nai/1975/nai_TSCH-2005-151-674_1975-nd.pdf
6. [ibid](#)
7. http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/nai/1965/nai_TSCH-98-6-429_1965-01-14_a.pdf
8. http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/nai/1965/nai_TSCH-98-6-429_1965-01-15.pdf
9. http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/nai/1975/nai_TSCH-2005-151-674_1975-nd.pdf

