

Ireland

4

CONFIDENTIAL

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

DIPLOMATIC REPORT No. 213/81

WLU 051/4

General Distribution

UNITED STATES

1 December, 1981

MS

NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE UNITED STATES

Prime Minister

Her Majesty's Ambassador at Washington to the
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

A. J. C. 9. 2

SUMMARY

The Irish Republican movement has deep roots in the US and depends heavily on American support. NORAID, the IRA's agents in America, capitalised heavily on the recent hunger strike (paragraphs 1-3).

2. The US Administration supported our stand on political status for PIRA prisoners. The US Congress proved more difficult, and vociferous. Editorial comment was balanced, but not uncritical, UK/US relations were not seriously impaired by the hunger strike but we could have suffered damage had the hunger strike persisted (paragraphs 4-7).

3. We have learned lessons from the hunger strike. It took a long time, and a change of mood in Dublin, before allegations of British intransigence began to fade. Even so, many Americans will have sympathised with PIRA aims and been prepared to tolerate their methods. PIRA have taken some hard knocks in the US media since the hunger strike ended (paragraphs 8 and 9).

4. There is no Unionist constituency in the US. Most interested Americans believe reunification to be the only answer and are unlikely to be persuaded otherwise. We can take advantage of this attitude, without compromising our own position, by being seen:

- (a) to work closely with the Irish Government; and
- (b) to be seriously engaged in the search for political progress in Northern Ireland.

In the light of recent developments, our position on Northern Ireland in the US looks better than for some time (paragraphs 10 and 11).

(Confidential)
My Lord,

Washington,
1 December, 1981.

Against the tumult, following the end of the hunger strike, of increased IRA terrorism and Loyalist anger, it may be appropriate to take stock from here; to look at the impact of the hunger strike on US opinion and on Anglo/US relations and at the significance of American opinion on the Northern Ireland issue.

2. The Republican movement in Ireland has deep roots in the US. The massive emigration from Ireland to the US in the famine of the 1840s influenced the character of the movement for Home Rule and ultimately for independence. The Irish men and women who fled to America were not of the Protestant landlord class who had so often led the sporadic movements for greater control over Ireland's affairs. They were Catholic and poor and they banded together for their own protection, particularly on the East Coast of the US whose Establishment was almost entirely confined to Anglo-Saxon Protestants. As they established themselves in the US their thoughts turned back to home. Through the Fenian

CONFIDENTIAL

movement they provided a powerful source of moral and practical support to the incipient Republican movement in Ireland. For the first time, the British Government of the day was obliged to acknowledge that there was an Irish nation in America beyond Britain's reach and hostile to her purposes.

3. Today in America there are 20 million people who can claim Irish descent. Perhaps 15 per cent of them are interested in Irish affairs and an even smaller percentage actively involved in trying to promote reunification. The two groups most closely associated with the aim of violent overthrow of the British connection in Northern Ireland are:

- (a) the Irish Northern Aid Committee (NORAID), the agents of the Provisional IRA in the US; and
- (b) the Irish National Caucus who, under the spurious campaign of human rights, give aid and comfort to the advocates of violence.

During the first six months of this year, NORAID reported the collection of about a quarter of a million dollars as a direct result of the passions and sympathy aroused by the hunger strike which they skilfully exploited. This was a bigger haul than they had achieved over any single issue previously. Their success was probably the most damaging outcome of the hunger strike for British interests as far as the US was concerned. NORAID also conducted large, frequent and unpleasant demonstrations outside our Consulates-General in America and our Mission in New York. No one was hurt and, with the exception of Boston, damage was slight. But the intensity of hatred shown by some of the demonstrators, combined with the reluctance of the police in some cities to take effective action, caused us considerable anxiety. A notable improvement in police protection followed your intervention with Secretary Haig in July.

4. NORAID and their dedicated supporters are beyond our influence, or that of the Irish Government. Our efforts during the hunger strike therefore concentrated on three major targets. The most important was the US Government. President Reagan has been happy to make the most of his Irish heritage; oratory about the Emerald Isle comes easily to him. There are many in prominent positions in the present US Administration who describe themselves as having an Irish background—Haig, Clark and Deaver to name three. But the President resisted all attempts to drag the US Government into the hunger strike. In particular, he replied firmly to the letter which Dr. Fitzgerald sent him in July asking him to use his influence with the Prime Minister to seek a solution to the issue; Mr. Reagan said that there were no grounds for the US to get involved. Similarly, his only response to a letter from the Four Horsemen and other Irish American leaders seeking a meeting at the end of August was to send Mr. Walter Stoessel, Under-Secretary for Political Affairs at the State Department, to address the group. The President himself did not respond to the Four Horsemen's letter. Secretary Haig went so far as to say publicly that "if there were not a Great Britain playing the rôle that it's playing there today, we might even have to create one to prevent a blood-bath".

5. We had uphill work in Congress. An important landmark was the setting up of the Friends of Ireland, an influential group of over 60 responsible Irish American political leaders, dedicated to peaceful progress in Ireland. The Friends were a welcome antidote to the nefarious *Ad Hoc* Committee for Irish Affairs under Congressman Mario Biaggi which is no more than the creature of the Irish National Caucus. At the same time the new group's advocacy of a united Ireland, albeit by consent, made them a potentially significant source of pressure on us. The Four Horsemen (who were the principal founders of the Friends of Ireland) wrote to the Prime Minister in May accusing her of intransigence and the Friends of Ireland as a whole sent a further message in July putting the onus firmly on us to compromise to bring the hunger strike to an end. In their meeting with the Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office, Mr. Michael Alison, in the same

month, the Friends of Ireland made it clear that while, in theory, they supported our stand on the five demands, they hoped that we would give way on enough of them to bring the hunger strike to an end, to take the political pressure off them and to undercut growing support for NORAID.

6. The third significant group was the press and public opinion. Public opinion was affected by the scenes of violence shot in Belfast and shown on US television. We had no control over this material. Its impact was, however, significant. It created an image of a province in flames and showed scenes of bitter conflict for which our policies were somehow held responsible. Editorial comment, on which we worked hard, was, by contrast, balanced. No major newspaper supported the Provisional IRA's demands and, although some were critical of the British Government for not doing more to bring the hunger strike to an end, this was more a reflection of the widespread feeling that "something must be done" than of well worked out criticism of our position.

7. It is impossible to gauge US public opinion on the hunger strike precisely. Only a minority of Americans—indeed, only a minority of Irish Americans—has any abiding interest in Northern Ireland. It takes dramatic events to get the province into the mainstream of public attention. Bobby Sands became nationally known for a brief period but the impact of successive deaths progressively diminished as time went on and as the futility of the hunger strike became more and more apparent. Overall, I do not think that US/UK relations were lastingly impaired by the hunger strike though, had it persisted, the damage could have been serious. The mood in Congress could have hardened and taken the form of resolutions and measures harmful to our wider interests; NORAID would have continued to raise large sums of money and might have been able to jack up support for their otherwise ineffective boycott of British goods. Even now, the interest of the US labour movement, some of whose members have been consistently hostile to us, is unhelpfully engaged in Northern Ireland as never before. The climate of opinion for inward investment has worsened. The US Government, while supporting our position, had to contend with public and Congressional pressure which brought them up against leading politicians such as Speaker O'Neill with whom they had enough trouble on the domestic front already. They are not out of the wood yet: Irish American organisations are vociferously protesting the Administration's decision to deny a visa to Owen Carron, MP.

8. Could we have done better? Our performance in handling the media in the US has been carefully analysed by Mr. Kelvin White and we shall implement his recommendations following Ministerial approval. Overall, our public position in the US was never as bad as it was made out to be in the British press who drew exaggerated conclusions from ephemeral, if unpleasant, events and measured US opinion by the yardstick of noisy demonstrations rather than by the attitude of the public at large, the press and the US Congress and Government. None the less, we had an enormous disadvantage to overcome. Sands's election to Parliament brought him instantly to prominence and appeared to substantiate PIRA's claims to represent Catholic opinion in Northern Ireland. Sands's willingness to die for his cause had the same effect on many Americans as did the immolation of Buddhist priests during the Vietnam war. By contrast with the spectacle of his sacrifice, our own stand appeared to some as casuistical; if we could not grant political status we should at least be flexible and ingenious enough to find some compromise that would bring an end to the deaths. It took the increasingly obvious cynicism of the PIRA campaign, in turn reflected in a change of attitude on the part of Catholic leaders in Northern Ireland and the Irish Government in Dublin, to bring home to Americans that we were taking our stand on a vital issue of principle.

9. In a speech just before he left Washington, the Irish Ambassador claimed as one of his successes here the fact that Ireland was firmly back on the American agenda. While he exaggerated his claim, it has some basis and, in the long run, this may prove to be one of the more important consequences of the hunger strike in terms of Anglo/US relations. It is not helpful to our own policy on Northern Ireland. For just as the embryonic Republican movement in Ireland depended a hundred years ago on American support, so the Provisional IRA of today depend on the US for money, for arms and for political support. The hunger strike gave PIRA an opportunity to portray themselves in America as the victims of oppression and champions of freedom in Ireland. I suspect that many Americans, knowing little about them, will have sympathised with the aims of the Provisional IRA as depicted by NORAID and, as a result, will have been prepared to show some tolerance for their methods. Against that, recent PIRA actions have again shown them in their true colours, and PIRA have taken some significant media knocks—most significantly, a very damaging presentation on CBS TV of their socialist aims and links with international terrorism.

10. But there is one fact of American life that we shall never change. It is rooted in American folk memory of the War of Independence and nurtured by the size, strength and nature of the Irish American constituency in this country. It is that most Americans with an interest in Northern Ireland instinctively feel that the only way to resolve the issue is for Britain to "get out" and for the two parts of Ireland to be reunited. There is no Unionist constituency in America and Unionist politicians have, in contrast with their Catholic counterparts, failed to foster one. Even Americans sympathetic to Britain argue that our best interest must surely be served by removing the albatross of Northern Ireland from around our necks. The behaviour of so-called Loyalist leaders reinforces them in their view. I do not believe that we can significantly change that perception. I realise that it is hard to reconcile it with our own commitments to the people of Northern Ireland. But our position here is immeasurably strengthened to the extent that we are seen to be:

- (a) working in harmony with the Irish Government whose attitude sets the tone for much Congressional opinion and public comment; and
- (b) seriously engaged in the determined search for political progress in Northern Ireland.

We stand a better chance of convincing Americans of the rightness and inevitability of our guarantee to the people of Northern Ireland if we demonstrate that we are not prepared to allow it to constitute a veto over all political progress.

11. Northern Ireland will remain a high priority for this Embassy and for our Consuls General in the US. We devoted a major part of our resources to the issue before and during the hunger strike. With the help of the recommendations made by Mr. White and as a result of some new staff dispositions, we are better placed than we were nine months ago to devote a sustained effort to explaining our Northern Ireland policies to the press and public, to maintaining the support of the US Administration for what we are doing and to channelling Congressional interest in Northern Ireland in a helpful direction. Grim as the situation is in Northern Ireland, from the American angle it looks better now than it has done for a year or so.

12. I am copying this despatch to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, to the UK Permanent Representative to the UN, to HM Ambassador at Dublin, to HM Consuls General in the US, and to the Executive Director of BIS New York.

I am Sir

Yours faithfully

NICHOLAS HENDERSON.