

‘Serious umbrage’ at attempted all-Ireland approach to Europe

Officials feared Republic would use its European Community presidency to set agenda.



Former taoiseach Charles Haughey with former minister for foreign affairs Gerry Collins (front right). Photograph: Eddie Kelly/The Irish Times

British officials strongly resisted what they regarded as attempts by Dublin to adopt an all-Ireland approach to European Community matters in 1990 and 1986.

In 1990, during the Irish presidency of the community, as the European Union was then known, Northern Ireland civil servants discovered what they described as the “relatively imminent publication” of an Irish discussion paper on “a possible ‘all Ireland’ approach to EC matters”.

The senior Northern Ireland Office (NIO) official, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, commented that “if this is indeed the case, I think it is outrageous and that we are entitled to take serious umbrage”.

Sir Kenneth acknowledged that during a review of the Anglo-Irish ministerial

conference, both sides had recognized that the completion of the EU single market in 1992 would generate common opportunities and common difficulties for both parts of Ireland.

- British state papers: John Major did not want admission of 'regret' over Bloody Sunday
- Leaked phone calls held up talks between John Major and John Bruton
- British state papers: PM John Major saw Gerry Adams as a 'clever little devil'

However, Sir Kenneth said that at a previous ministerial meeting he had informed Ireland's minister for foreign affairs, Gerry Collins, that if a paper was to be drawn upon this topic the British government, as well as Northern Ireland's MEPs, would have an interest in its preparation.

The senior official indicated that this point had caused Collins "discomfiture" and the UK side had not yet had any response.

British officials discovered the progress made on the paper in the run-up to a visit by the then taoiseach Charles Haughey to Belfast to talk to local business leaders about European integration. Sir Kenneth commented that "we have a situation in which there is every possibility of the taoiseach, wearing the mantle of the presidency, speaking in Belfast on the platform of an 'all-Ireland' EC paper commissioned by his government... about which there has been no discussion with us whatsoever. I think this is an utterly unacceptable position from the point of view of HMG."

Pressurize

Sir Kenneth argued that if Dublin was to again pressurize the British over matters such as the behaviour of the Ulster Defence Regiment, the issue provided an opportunity for the UK to retort that "a viable [Anglo-Irish] agreement has to be worked bilaterally, not unilaterally".

Five years previously another all-Ireland European initiative, this time by the Irish minister for agriculture Austin Deasy, had raised British hackles. In a speech in December 1985, Deasy had suggested that he should negotiate on behalf of Northern Ireland when it came to the Common Agricultural Policy.

An NIO paper drafted in 1986 says the Deasy proposal “would lead in effect to the establishment of a common market for agricultural products throughout Ireland (North and South)”. The paper, written by civil servant WH Jack, says “the Deasy approach raises major constitutional problems. Negotiations in the Community are ‘excepted matters’ for UK ministers to decide. They could not be undertaken by a minister from another state without major UK and EC legislative changes which would be highly controversial. There would be severe difficulties within the machinery of government.”

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