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# The 1974–5 Threat of a British Withdrawal from Northern Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

Arising from the release of Irish and British state papers for the years 1974 and 1975, Professor Ronan Fanning wrote in the *Irish Independent* about the Irish government's reactions in 1975 to what appeared to be a danger that the British government might withdraw from Northern Ireland. This current article outlines the circumstances in which, as Minister for Foreign Affairs, I submitted a memorandum to government on this issue on 11 June 1975, incorporating a document prepared at the request of the government by the Inter-Departmental Unit on Northern Ireland. It also deals with the reactions of Conor Cruise O'Brien, Minister for Posts and Telegraphs and Labour Spokesman on Northern Ireland, and of Assistant Cabinet Secretary Dermot Nally to this memorandum, including their concern at any consultation with the SDLP on this issue; and it places this matter in the political context of the period.

## INTRODUCTION

The release of the Irish and British state papers for the years 1974 and 1975 revealed the depth of the concern of the National Coalition government, in which I was then Minister for Foreign Affairs, about the possibility that Harold Wilson might be contemplating a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland in the event of a failure to reach agreement on the future of the North by the convention that was meeting during the course of the latter year. There was a clear danger that such a withdrawal might be followed by full-scale civil war and anarchy in Northern Ireland, with inevitable disastrous repercussions for our state as well as for the North—and possibly also for Great Britain itself.

In the *Sunday Independent* of 1 January 2006 Professor Ronan Fanning published details of a government memorandum on this subject circulated to the Cabinet by the Department of Foreign Affairs on 11 June 1975.<sup>1</sup> Unusually, this memorandum was withdrawn from the state papers to be released by the Department of the Taoiseach to historians. A copy of the memorandum was, however, included in other papers simultaneously released, together with a related discussion paper prepared by the

<sup>1</sup>Ronan Fanning, 'How Dublin prepared for the threat of NI Domesday', *Sunday Independent*, 1 January 2006.

Inter-Departmental Unit on Northern Ireland. A counter-memorandum of 17 June prepared by Conor Cruise O'Brien, located elsewhere in the state papers, was also released. So too were notes on the original Foreign Affairs memorandum made by Assistant Secretary to the Government Dermot Nally on 17 June, and again on 7 July after a discussion that he had with Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave.

The records show that this memorandum was withdrawn from the Cabinet agenda on 24 July 1975. Professor Fanning, who was, I believe, unaware of the fact that a 'clearing the decks process' at the end of July each year was a normal procedure with that government, was, I feel, incorrect in attributing particular significance to the withdrawal of the memorandum. Nevertheless, he was certainly right in drawing from the contents of these documents the conclusion that this memorandum had aroused some tensions within government at that time.

He also said that the memorandum was never discussed by the Cabinet. But there is in fact no evidence one way or the other on this point, because—however curious this may seem—Irish Cabinet records are traditionally confined to a note of decisions taken. If no decisions are taken, there is no record of whether a memorandum was or was not discussed.

Whilst 30 years later I have no personal recollection of such a discussion, that proves nothing one way or the other. For, although I have a very clear memory of many events in my political life, there are inevitably many gaps in my recollections—sometimes, I have found, in respect of quite important events.

All I can contribute on this particular point is that whilst, because of my duties as foreign minister, I was absent from a number of Cabinet meetings in June and July 1975, records show that I was present on eight occasions between 20 June and 23 July. The memorandum might have been discussed on any of these occasions—or (but most improbably), on an occasion when I was absent.

#### THE POSSIBILITY OF BRITISH WITHDRAWAL FROM NORTHERN IRELAND

In order to clarify the circumstances in which the Foreign Affairs memorandum of June 1975 was prepared, it is necessary to explain why we suspected from mid-1974 until the latter part of 1975 that Harold Wilson was contemplating a possible British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.

Irish politicians had been very wary of Harold Wilson following his 1971 visit to Ireland as leader of the opposition in Britain, when—through the agency of John O'Connell, TD—he had arranged secretly to meet IRA leaders, under the cover of his discussions with the Irish government and opposition. The strength of the feelings of our democratic leaders about this episode was not, however, publicly ventilated at the time because of a concern not to alienate a possible future—as well as past—British prime minister.

We now know from released British Cabinet papers for 1974 that after his return to office in early 1974 Wilson directed that the option of British withdrawal from Northern Ireland be examined. And, although in retrospect the danger of such a withdrawal may have been greatest in 1974, we know from the published diaries of Bernard Donoghue, who was special assistant to Harold Wilson 1974–6, that this option, in conjunction with an attempted negotiated independence for Northern Ireland as a dominion of the Commonwealth, continued to be favoured by Wilson (and it would appear by Roy Jenkins) until it was finally rejected by the Cabinet Committee on Northern Ireland on 11 November 1975.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Bernard Donoghue, *Prime minister: the conduct of policy under Harold Wilson and James Callaghan* (London, 1987).

At that final discussion of the issue, amongst those who opposed Wilson's suggestion that Britain withdraw from Northern Ireland and allow it to become independent were Merlyn Rees, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; Denis Healey, Chancellor of the Exchequer; and, most significantly, Jim Callaghan, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs—with whom I had three months earlier had informal discussions on Northern Ireland whilst we were both on holidays in adjacent parts of West Cork.

It is clear from the released British Cabinet papers that Harold Wilson's principal private secretary, Robert Armstrong, now Lord Armstrong of Ilminster (who later, as Cabinet Secretary to Margaret Thatcher's government, played a key role in the negotiation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985), also sought to dissuade his prime minister from pursuing the proposal to withdraw from Northern Ireland.

So far as the Irish government was concerned, the failure of Northern Ireland Secretary Merlyn Rees—when he caved in to pressure from the British Army—to tackle the Northern Ireland workers' strike of May 1974, and the consequent collapse of the power-sharing executive, had given reason to doubt thereafter the capacity and willingness of the Wilson government to stand firm against a continuation of both Loyalist and IRA violence. Whilst, of course, members of the Irish government were unaware of the debate then taking place on this issue within the British Cabinet's Northern Ireland Committee, it seemed to some of them at least that if the British government had felt unable to exercise its authority effectively in relation to that particular crisis, there was clearly a danger that it could be tempted at some point to withdraw from Northern Ireland—despite the risk of chaos there that such a move could produce.

Moreover, there was a hint to this effect from Bernard Donoghue to Assistant Cabinet Secretary Dermot Nally; and Harold Wilson, in his first inter-governmental meeting with Liam Cosgrave just after the former's return to power in April 1974, placed so much emphasis on British political and public pressure for withdrawal as to suggest that he himself might be thinking along these lines.

As the year 1975 dawned, bringing with it the first Irish presidency of the European Community, my concern as Minister for Foreign Affairs about the possibility of a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland prompted me to raise the issue privately with Henry Kissinger, in the margins of a meeting in Washington, DC, on 8 January at which my EU colleagues had given me the task of launching the first EU-US foreign policy discussion. Although Kissinger had already made clear to me that he had a policy of non-involvement in Irish affairs—a stance that he attributed to the influence of his Irish-American wife, Nancy—he nevertheless responded that in the event of such a grave development as a British withdrawal, he would be open to an approach from me.

During my brief stay in Washington rumours had begun to circulate about British contacts with 'Sinn Féin' (which of course meant the IRA), regarding the possible continuation of a ceasefire by that organisation that had been initiated before Christmas 1974. Over the next six weeks Liam Cosgrave and I received a series of briefings from the British ambassador on these contacts. These briefings were deeply disturbing, especially as each successive encounter revealed the misleading character of the ambassador's earlier briefings.

Moreover, in the only direct contact ever made to us by Sinn Féin (at a casual encounter in a hotel lobby in Belfast), a Department of Foreign Affairs official was told by that organisation's Belfast organiser that the British government and the IRA were planning negotiations abroad, in connection with which the IRA wanted our government to give free passes to three of their leaders who were on the run—a proposal that we ignored!

Then, on 8 February, Robert Fisk published in *The Times* details of twelve points that he claimed had been agreed by the British with the Provisional IRA as a basis for the cessation of violence.<sup>3</sup> Although the British told us at the time that they were ‘at a loss’ to know where these twelve points came from, Merlyn Rees later revealed that they had in fact been presented by ‘Sinn Féin’ at a meeting on 21 January—an occasion at which the British ambassador had earlier told us ‘little had taken place, because Sinn Féin had had little to say’.

In a further briefing by the British ambassador in April we were told that in later discussions with ‘Sinn Féin’ they had ‘harped on’ British withdrawal, and that the British response had been a reference to the ‘extreme complexity of Northern Ireland’ and a query as to why ‘Sinn Féin’ had not talked to Protestant extremists. Far from being a rejection of British withdrawal, these responses, as reported to us by the British themselves, seemed to point towards encouragement having been given to the idea of negotiated independence on the basis of agreement between the two lots of paramilitaries.

#### OUR REACTIONS TO THE DANGER OF BRITISH WITHDRAWAL

All these disturbing events led the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Inter-Departmental Unit on Northern Ireland (known as the IDU) to set out alternative scenarios that could arise if the British government were to decide on a withdrawal from Northern Ireland. The IDU had, in 1974, been charged by the government, under Dermot Nally’s chairmanship, with exploring the implications of a British withdrawal. The three scenarios considered by the IDU following the events of the early months of 1975 were: negotiated independence, negotiated re-partition and the collapse of Northern Ireland into anarchy.

In contemplating these three possible scenarios, my department and the IDU were aware that our small Irish Army of 12,500, part of which was already engaged on border duties, would be quite inadequate to cope with a crisis of the magnitude that could arise in the event of a collapse into civil war and anarchy in Northern Ireland. However, if we were to attempt to strengthen the army to prepare for a crisis, that could create serious unrest and a threat to public order within our state (we had already been unable to prevent the Provisional IRA from burning down the British embassy in Merrion Square in 1972). Furthermore, action to strengthen the army might well be interpreted by Northern Unionists as a threat to them rather than as a measure designed to protect our own security. And that, in turn, could precipitate a crisis in the North of the very kind we were trying to prevent. Accordingly, it was felt that such a strengthening of the army had to be ruled out.

At the same time we were coming under strong pressure from the SDLP, and in particular from John Hume, to approach the British for an assurance that they would not withdraw. I firmly rejected such a direct approach because if we were thus to go on record as recognising such a possibility, that could have precisely the opposite effect to what we were seeking to produce: by our raising the issue openly in that way, the British might have felt themselves psychologically freed to pursue just such a course.

In this situation we in the Department of Foreign Affairs decided to seek to ensure that informed British opinion recognised the dangers of any weakening of British resolve, thus creating pressure against any British withdrawal—without, however,

<sup>3</sup>Robert Fisk, *The Times*, 8 February 1975.

being seen to raise the issue ourselves.

Accordingly, in early June in London I briefed two responsible British journalists on the Northern Ireland situation—Keith Kyle of the BBC and John Cole of the *Guardian*. Over the next couple of months reports deriving from this briefing seemed to produce the desired result. But, in the meantime, with the IDU report complete, I judged that the moment had come to alert the government as a whole to the dangers we faced.

#### THE MEMORANDUM OF 11 JUNE 1975

On 11 June I submitted to the Cabinet secretariat the memorandum that Professor Fanning has now located in the National Archive, together with an accompanying report of the Inter-Departmental Unit on the three ‘worst case scenarios’ that had been identified, viz. negotiated independence, negotiated re-partition and a collapse of Northern Ireland into anarchy.

This memorandum was naturally directed towards avoiding at all cost the third of these scenarios. It drew the conclusion that, because of the huge disruption that re-partition would cause and the extent to which such an outcome would be likely permanently to consolidate the political division of the island, the least dangerous outcome of a possible British withdrawal—if we should after all fail to head it off—and the only one offering even a remote hope of a peaceful outcome, would be negotiated independence. (We were aware that some Unionist politicians, as well as some in the SDLP, had at that time shown signs privately of believing that a peaceful accommodation on a power-sharing basis might be possible in such circumstances.)

The memorandum also raised the question of whether, if the Cabinet shared the view that we should prepare a fall-back position of this kind, contact should be made on this matter with the SDLP. In retrospect it was, I believe, a mistake to have raised in this memorandum the question of possible contacts with the SDLP.

Moreover, it is also now clear—although I do not think this was ever raised directly with me, and I cannot now recall to what extent I was aware of it at the time—that aspects of my briefing of the two British journalists had deeply disturbed Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave. It appears that he took a very negative view of any reference being made outside our administration to the vulnerability of our state to the consequences of a possible collapse of Northern Ireland into anarchy—a vulnerability that I had thought it necessary to refer to in my briefing.

#### *Relations with the SDLP*

To understand reactions within government to our memorandum, it is necessary, first, to say something about the relationship between the SDLP and the Irish state and government. Since its foundation in 1971 we in the Republic had an important common interest with this Northern Ireland political party, which was a powerful barrier against the IRA—the openly stated agenda of which at that time was the destruction of the democratic Irish state and the substitution by force of an all-Ireland ‘socialist republic’.

But whilst the SDLP and the Irish government shared a certain common interest vis-à-vis the IRA, our and their concerns were not, and could not be, identical. The primary duty of an Irish government (to which, because of my family background, I have always been very sensitive), has to be to preserve the security of the Irish state, and the interests of this state also require that it seek a balanced outcome in Northern

Ireland that would command the support of both communities there. The SDLP, on the other hand, was then the main voice of the Northern nationalist community in its struggle against unionist domination.

For much of the time, these two sets of distinct interests could be, and were, met by a similar stance—but there were bound to be some tensions between their and our approaches, and a clash between our interests and theirs could in certain circumstances arise. Consequently, the extent to which it would be appropriate or wise for the Irish government to disclose its hand in this matter to the leaders of that party, an issue that was raised by the memorandum, was a potentially controversial issue.

Within the Irish political system this situation was also complicated by an emotional factor that has rarely surfaced publicly, or been identified by political commentators. This is the existence since the mid-1970s of an element of resentment amongst many politicians in all parties in the Republic with the extent to which the common interests of the SDLP and the Irish state on most, but not all issues, have often tied us into a closer relationship with that party than some people in our state have felt to be comfortable. Amongst those who were particularly unhappy about our relationship with the SDLP was Conor Cruise O'Brien.

Because at times my commitment to keeping lines open to Unionists created tensions with some of the SDLP leadership, I had more reason than most of my colleagues to be conscious of the fact that the particular interests of that party and those of our government were far from identical. But because I also shared the view of my professional staff in the Department of Foreign Affairs that negative emotions have no useful role to play in politics or diplomacy, I never came to share some of my colleagues' muted hostility towards that party.

#### CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN

When the National Coalition government was formed in March 1973 Conor Cruise O'Brien, Minister for Posts and Telegraphs (who, as a diplomat, had worked at the UN between 1955 and 1957 with then Foreign Minister Liam Cosgrave), was also given responsibility for government media relations. In addition, he was accorded the role of Northern Ireland spokesman of the Labour Party—the latter being a concept that did not easily fit within the normal working of a Cabinet system.

However, at that early stage this latter role did not seem to me to be likely to create any problems, for since 1969 Conor and I had held very similar views in relation to Northern Ireland: from that year onwards both of us had sought, with some success, to move our respective parties away from the irredentist nationalist approach that they had adopted at the time of the declaration of the Republic in 1949.

Both Conor and myself were more concerned than most of our colleagues about unionist as well as nationalist attitudes. Indeed, when I became Minister for Foreign Affairs I immediately appointed a diplomat to liaise with the Unionists, and thereafter maintained personal contact with key Unionist leaders.

The closeness of Conor's approach and mine in this respect—despite some differences between us on the possible scope of the proposed Council of Ireland—became strikingly apparent at the December 1973 Sunningdale Conference. In the closing stages of that conference, the Irish government team had to spend a long night together awaiting the outcome of negotiations on policing between Ted Heath, Brian Faulkner and John Hume. To while away the night hours, Assistant Cabinet Secretary Dermot Nally suggested that the seven ministers present individually

assess the success to date of each of the parties attending the conference in relation to each of four main issues that had emerged during the course of the discussions—giving marks to each party on each issue.

The collective judgement of the ministers was that the Irish and British governments rated marks of about 60%, the SDLP 50% and the Unionists about 40%. But what was striking was that Conor and myself had both rated the likely outcome for the Unionist Party of what had been agreed to date much lower than any of our colleagues. Conor had given the outcome up to that point an even lower rating than I had, but it was I rather than Conor who next morning sought to restore the balance by approaching Paddy Devlin, the SDLP delegate most sensitive to Unionist concerns, to ask him to persuade his colleagues to take a softer line with their opponents.

However, although Conor's views and mine on Northern Ireland policy were thus quite closely aligned, his temperament led him to become more and more fixated on the need to give primary consideration to Unionist sensibilities—for in the long run our problems would be with them rather than with fellow-nationalists. Increasingly, however, in Conor's case, this legitimate concern came to be at the expense of the SDLP, for which Conor developed a growing dislike—a fact that soon became sufficiently evident to evoke a reciprocal negative response to him from some of that party's leaders. The consequent tension came to complicate the development of our Northern Ireland policy, which depended greatly on the SDLP remaining a strong barrier against a growth of Northern nationalist support for Sinn Féin and the IRA.

So, although I was much closer to Conor Cruise O'Brien than anyone else in government on the need to be sensitive to Unionist concerns, my failure to share his emotionally negative stance towards the SDLP—a stance that seemed to me to risk playing into the hands of Sinn Féin and the IRA—paradoxically led him increasingly to concentrate his fire on me, rather than on other members of government from whose views on the North he differed much more sharply.

As a result, I became the recipient of many long letters from him on this subject, and when—due to pressure of work—I failed to respond to all of them, he even wrote at length to my rather bemused wife, Joan, to complain about my Northern Ireland stance! And he also developed a growing hostility to the Department of Foreign Affairs, in which he had himself served with great distinction until 1961.

### *Conor Cruise O'Brien's counter-memorandum*

The consequence of all this was that when Conor Cruise O'Brien received his copy of my 11 June memorandum, he responded six days later with a counter-memorandum, which Professor Fanning has been led to see as 'a vigorous repudiation' of our memorandum. This was because Conor treated the memorandum not as a basis for reflection by the government on how we might prepare in strict confidence for possible outcomes of a British withdrawal—i.e. negotiated independence, a negotiated re-partition or civil war and anarchy in the North—but rather as if I had proposed a public ventilation of this issue! For example, he argued that a confidential exploration by the Cabinet of how we might deal with a British attempt to negotiate independence for Northern Ireland 'would diminish the prospect of continued direct rule and would in effect let the British "off the hook", by enabling them to withdraw in a favourable international climate'<sup>4</sup>—and so on. And—as if

<sup>4</sup>Fanning, 'How Dublin prepared'.

this were in some way a contradiction of the policy being pursued by the Department of Foreign Affairs rather than a cogent re-statement of that very policy—he concluded that ‘the choice lies between British rule and Protestant rule’ and that it was ‘quite clearly in our interest to do everything possible—which may not be very much—to try to ensure that the British stay’.<sup>5</sup>

That, of course, was what we in the Department of Foreign Affairs had been working to achieve. Conor’s counter-memorandum was in fact a classic example of his capacity to invent and then vigorously denounce a disagreement where little or none existed.

#### OTHER REACTIONS TO THE MEMORANDUM

My recollection is that a somewhat similarly negative approach to the original memorandum was taken by some others in government who preferred not to discuss the unpalatable alternatives with which I feared we might in certain circumstances be faced. Like Conor, some of them also seemed to feel that for the Cabinet to have a confidential discussion of these issues would in some unexplained way risk creating public alarm and weakening international confidence in our state and our economy.

For his part, Assistant Secretary to the Cabinet Dermot Nally—who later was to lead successfully and harmoniously the team of mainly Foreign Affairs negotiators of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement—recorded on 17 June 1975 his view that the possible consequences of Northern Ireland becoming independent were so ‘horrific’ that ‘we should on no account give any support to, or engage in any open analysis or discussion of, the subject...including any analysis or discussion, with even the semblance of official backing, with the SDLP’.<sup>6</sup> And on 7 July, following a discussion with Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave, he added that ‘it would be well to disillusion the SDLP of any ideas they may have that this country, or any other external force, could or would provide worthwhile guarantees of civil rights etc. in an independent Northern Ireland’, as well as dispelling ‘any illusions they may have as to the capacity of the Irish Army in any situation of confrontation in Northern Ireland’.<sup>7</sup>

I totally agreed that we should not encourage Northern illusions that we had the capacity to intervene successfully in a ‘doomsday situation’ in the North, and still vividly recall my horror at a radio interview given by Minister for Defence Paddy Donegan in, I think, 1974, in the course of which he had seemed to offer a prospect of successful Irish military intervention in a Northern Ireland doomsday situation. I had always known that to be quite impossible and to be an initiative that would be liable to put at risk the lives of many nationalists, especially in Belfast.

But whilst I might share Conor Cruise O’Brien’s doubts about external guarantees of human rights in an independent Northern Ireland, it nevertheless seemed to me that if the British were to decide to leave Northern Ireland, then, rather than face re-partition and/or civil war and anarchy there, a ‘least bad’ alternative would be to join with Britain in attempting to secure an agreed power-sharing government in an independent Northern Ireland, backed by any external guarantees that we could secure.

<sup>5</sup>Fanning, ‘How Dublin prepared’.

<sup>6</sup>Fanning, ‘How Dublin prepared’.

<sup>7</sup>Fanning, ‘How Dublin prepared’.

The reactions evoked by this memorandum suggest that it would have been wiser never to have raised in it the potentially controversial issue of possible consultation with the SDLP. Moreover it might have been wiser to have circulated the memorandum, at least initially, to a smaller group: the Security Committee of the Cabinet was such a group, but there was the problem that I was not then a member of that body—although I was occasionally asked to attend meetings dealing with specific topics considered by that committee.

#### CONCLUSION

In the event, our concerns about a possible British withdrawal were eased in the immediately following months. Our efforts to alert informed British opinion indirectly on the dangers involved seem to have paid off. As mentioned earlier, the last occasion when independence for Northern Ireland was officially discussed was at a meeting of the Wilson government's Cabinet Committee on Northern Ireland on 11 November 1975. In respect of that occasion Bernard Donoghue records in his published diary, with obvious regret, that

the politicians were not interested. Rees, Healy and Callaghan all said 'do nothing'...It was impossible to make progress with reluctant ministers. Especially Jim Callaghan who has experience in Ulster.<sup>8</sup>

Callaghan's opposition must have been crucial. Prior to that November meeting Bernard Donoghue does not record him as playing any part in discussions on independence for Northern Ireland: his duties as Foreign Secretary may have made it impossible for him to attend some or all of these meetings. But three months before that November Cabinet Committee meeting, he and I had holidayed in West Cork at the same time. He invited Jack Lynch and myself and our two wives to dinner in his daughter and son-in-law's house in Glandore, and shortly afterwards he dined with Joan and me in Schull. (Jack Lynch was not present on the second occasion as he had to go to Dublin to see a dying Eamon de Valera for the last time.)

A summary of my accounts of these two meetings, which I immediately sent to Dublin for the benefit of my department and Taoiseach Liam Cosgrave, appeared in the *Irish Times* of 29 December 2005.<sup>9</sup> At the first dinner Callaghan told us that he had disagreed with the handling of the Ulster Workers' strike. His government should not have given in to the strikers but should have sat it out. I then warned of the dangers if his government

failed to maintain control of the situation and to protect the minority...Pressure would then come on the Irish Government to take action to protect the minority, especially in East Ulster, which was beyond our power...Such a failure would threaten democratic government in the Republic, [which could create] a vacuum throughout Ireland,<sup>10</sup>

and that could pose a danger to Britain and north-west Europe, creating 'a situation in which the Soviet Union, China or Libya might meddle'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>Donoghue, *Prime minister*.

<sup>9</sup>John Bowman, 'West Cork provides room for discussions', *Irish Times*, 29 December 2005.

<sup>10</sup>See Bowman, 'West Cork provides room'.

<sup>11</sup>Bowman, 'West Cork provides room'.

Jack Lynch strongly supported my analysis, and our interventions evoked from Callaghan the response that Britain 'would not abandon its responsibilities'. And clearly, three months later he helped to ensure that it did not do so.

Looking back on that fraught period 30 years later, what remains most vivid in my mind about that time is the terrible sense of virtual impotence that I and others immediately involved felt in the face of the dangers which a British withdrawal would have created for our island, and our state. Neither then nor since has public opinion in Ireland realised how close to disaster our whole island came during the last two years of Harold Wilson's premiership.