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THE SUNNINGDALE COMMUNIQUÉ, 1973, AND BIPARTISANSHIP IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Catherine O’Donnell
THE SUNNINGDALE COMMUNIQUÉ, 1973, AND BIPARTISANSHIP IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

Catherine O’Donnell

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This paper examines the political debates in the Republic of Ireland surrounding the publication of the Sunningdale communiqué in December 1973. It highlights the level of division that existed at that time on issues related to the communiqué and Northern Ireland generally between the government parties, Fine Gael and Labour, and Fianna Fáil. It demonstrates the limited nature of bipartisanship towards Northern Ireland at that time despite statements to the contrary.

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Catherine O’Donnell was a Government of Ireland Post-Doctoral Fellow funded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences at the Humanities Institute of Ireland, University College Dublin, 2005-2007. Her book *Fianna Fáil, Irish republicanism and the Northern Ireland troubles, 1968-2005* was published by Irish Academic Press in 2007. She was previously a Research Fellow at the School of Politics, International Studies and Philosophy at Queen’s University, Belfast, where she worked with Dr Margaret O’Callaghan and Professor Mary E. Daly on a HEA-funded cross-border study of the 1966 commemoration of the 1916 Rising.
INTRODUCTION

In February 1973 a new coalition government of Fine Gael and the Labour Party came to power in the Republic of Ireland. The new coalition, led by Liam Cosgrave of Fine Gael and Brendan Corish of the Labour Party, had within the cabinet Dr Garret FitzGerald as Minister for Foreign Affairs and Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs. Both had suggested new approaches to the issue of Northern Ireland, ranging in FitzGerald's case to a policy of reconciliation and unity by consent (FitzGerald, 1972) to in O'Brien’s case the jettisoning of the idea of unity (O'Brien, 1972). As a result of their presence, and the absence of traditional anti-partitionist rhetoric from the Fine Gael and Labour Party lexicons, the coalition’s position on Northern Ireland was viewed as less rigid and more accommodating to the possibility of agreement with unionists (see Farrington, 2007, for Irish government in the Sunningdale negotiations).

Jack Lynch, as leader of Fianna Fáil and Taoiseach when the troubles erupted in 1968 until 1973, had publicly condemned IRA violence and advocated some form of conciliation with unionists, but had remained committed to the solution of a united Ireland. The “arms crisis” of 1970, when two members of Lynch’s cabinet, Neil Blaney and Charles Haughey, were sacked because of their alleged involvement in the importation of arms for use by nationalists in Northern Ireland had illustrated the dangerous, contentious and divisive nature of the issue of Northern Ireland for Fianna Fáil (O’Brien, 2000; Faulkner, 2005). The eruption of the troubles in Northern Ireland had in general reopened many political wounds in the Republic. Lynch had been reluctant to consult and debate the issue of Northern Ireland with the opposition (O'Donnell, 2007, ch. 1). The Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act 1972, sponsored by the Fianna Fáil government with the aim of combating IRA activities in the Republic, was, as will be seen below, subject to much contentious debate within the Dáil. Similarly, Northern Ireland and security were core issues, particularly for Fianna Fáil, in the 1973 general election. Yet within a number of months of the general election, members of the Dáil, including Lynch, by now the leader of the opposition, referred to the operation of a bipartisan approach towards Northern Ireland.

Similarly in December 1973, when as a result of negotiations at Sunningdale in England a communiqué was issued detailing an agreed plan for progress towards power sharing in Northern Ireland and the establishment of a Council of Ireland, discussions in the Dáil referred to this alleged bipartisan approach. The planned agreement never materialised and explanations for this have stressed unionist opposition, the position of the British government and the Irish government’s zeal in
relation to the Council of Ireland (Gillespie, 1998). Because the envisaged agree-
ment was aborted, a Dáil vote on the issues involved was avoided and the impor-
tance of a consensus among the political parties in the Republic to the success of
any agreement on Northern Ireland was less evident at the time than was the need
for unionist support. As such, the potential impact of political divisions in the Repub-
lic on the communiqué and the implementation of the envisaged agreement as ul-
timately ruinous remained unacknowledged. As a consequence, the literature on
the Sunningdale Communiqué does not reflect the level of discussion and dis-
agreement that it sparked between the political parties in the Republic. Nor does
the literature stress the importance of such political divisions to the overall political
process in Northern Ireland and at Anglo-Irish level.

While the memoirs of those involved in the negotiations offer unique insights into
the negotiating processes and an attempt at conflict resolution in the Irish context
(Currie, 2004; FitzGerald, 1991; Bloomfield, 1994; Faulkner, 1978), this paper
seeks to view the Sunningdale Communiqué from the perspective of contemporary
political discourse in the Republic. It examines the political context for the discus-
sion of Northern Ireland in the Republic in 1973 and the use of issues of security
and Northern Ireland in the 1973 general election. The response of the largest op-
position party, Fianna Fáil, to the Sunningdale Communiqué is assessed. The pa-
per argues that the Communiqué, rather than reflecting the bipartisan approach re-
ferred to by many politicians at the time, revealed the limitations to the operation of
such an approach and the continued political nature of the issue of Northern Ireland
in discussions between the parties. The paper argues that had the Sunningdale
process not collapsed and had it in fact resulted in the envisaged agreement be-
tween the parties and two governments, the level of disagreement within Fianna
Fáil and among the parties in the Republic would have been potentially lethal to the
ratification and implementation of such an agreement.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT IN THE REPUBLIC

In December 1972 Dr Noel Browne of the Labour Party, in a debate about the gov-
ernment’s planned amendment to the Offences Against the State Act, accused Fi-
anna Fáil of attempting to engineer a “a very dirty general election. The horror,
wounds, agony, suffering and deaths of fellow Irishmen and women in the North
had become a good issue for the Fianna Fáil government”, he said (Irish Times, 1
Dec. 1972). Despite Fine Gael’s eventual agreement to the amendment, in the
wake of two bombs in Dublin, the issues of security and Northern Ireland remained
central to Fianna Fáil’s attacks on the proposed coalition of Fine Gael and Labour
in the course of the general election in February 1973. From the beginning of the
general election campaign the Labour Party leader, Brendan Corish, said that “we
will not play politics with the North” (Irish Times, 8 Feb. 1973). In a similar vein, Fine
Gael’s spokesperson on Northern Ireland, Richie Ryan, also said that the issue of
Northern Ireland was above party politics and that decisions on Northern Ireland
needed to have the support of both the government and the opposition (Irish Times,
12 Feb. 1973). But Taoiseach Jack Lynch had already stated that the timing of the
election had been influenced by his belief that the challenges that would be posed
by the publication of the British White Paper on Northern Ireland at the end of March 1973 required a strong government, not one that was, like the then Fianna Fáil government was, in a minority position within the Dáil (Irish Times, 6 Feb. 1973). The new government, according to Lynch, would need the firm and unequivocal support of the people in order to deal effectively with the new situation that would be brought about by the White Paper (Irish Times, 13 Feb. 1973). The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Brian Lenihan, made the same argument about the need for a government with a strong mandate in dealing with Northern Ireland at that particular time: “Particularly more important than anything else is the delicate handling of the Northern situation which is now reaching a stage where the Taoiseach should be backed by the people, and given a mandate to act on behalf of Ireland with the British Government”.¹

Lynch emphasised the issue of security and highlighted his government’s “responsible and calm” handling of the Northern Ireland issue (Irish Times, 13 Feb. 1973). It was the very use of the issue of Northern Ireland in the election that the Labour leader objected to as “irresponsible” (Irish Times, 13 Feb. 1973) and Dr Conor Cruise O’Brien rejected the accusation from Fianna Fáil’s George Colley that he and the Labour Party were in favour of partition as a contemptible use of the Northern Ireland tragedy for electoral gain (Irish Times, 13 Feb. 1973).

Nevertheless, Lynch continued to assert that security was the supreme issue in the election (Irish Times, 16 Feb. 1973) and the stances adopted by Labour and Fine Gael in relation to the Offences Against the State Act featured in many speeches by Fianna Fáil members during the election campaign. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Brian Lenihan, attacked the coalition parties’ reluctance to support the Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act in December 1972. He referred to his government’s motives in relation to amending the Offences Against the State Act as “designed to prevent the North’s anarchy from spreading south” but that “It took bomb explosions in Dublin to persuade the power-hungry majority of Fine Gael to support their leader who is now offered as the alternative Coalition leader”.² Fianna Fáil speakers highlighted divisions within the coalition on security, the issue which the government had placed as central to the election. Michael O’Kennedy, speaking in Nenagh during the 1973 election campaign challenged the Fine Gael leader to clarify his position on whether the proposed coalition would repeal the act. He accused the coalition parties of “sheltering behind vague platitudes in an attempt to conceal their total lack of agreement on security policy” and argued that the statement “‘The Security question is above politics’ is the only answer their spokesmen give on this very vital question”. He claimed that reconciliation could not come about if the government was soft in relation to subversive groups and that “Lynch,

¹ Brian Lenihan, Boyle, Roscommon, 26 Feb. 1973, Fianna Fáil Archives, University College Dublin (FF Archives, UCD), P176/842.  
² Brian Lenihan, speaking at Roscommon, 27 Feb. 1973, FF Archives, UCD, P176/842
has proved strong, firm and resolute where Messrs. Cosgrave and Corish have proved themselves rash, unsure and unreliable" on this matter.³

The Fianna Fáil Minister for Defence, Gerry Cronin, also referred to the risks posed to the security of the state and highlighted the coalition’s reluctance to debate the issue as evidence of its lack of commitment to dealing with it:

How can Mr Cosgrave and his Coalition state that security is not an issue? How can they be certain that these subversives will not try out their policy of terror in this country? Plainly he can not. As a responsible political leader seeking the highest Government position is he not obliged to inform the electorate of this possibility and to state clearly how he would win support within the Coalition to deal satisfactorily with such a situation? So far Mr Cosgrave has been noticeably quiet. Can it be he has nothing to say or perhaps fears doing so in case of causing a giant split in his already delicate Coalition arrangement?⁴

The Tánaiste, Erskine Childers, also suggested that divisions existed within the coalition about the North that were reflected in different attitudes towards the Offences Against the State (Amendment) Act: “The rift between the Cosgrave, the FitzGerald and the Corish groups was now clearly visible, since Mr Corish had said a few days ago that the Labour Party would seek the repeal of the Act”. He argued that the risk of electing a coalition government divided on the issue of security was far too great given the constant threat to the South from illegal organisations.⁵

A large number of speeches delivered by various Fianna Fáil members made similar slights on Fine Gael and Labour’s refusal to discuss the issue of security, attacking the coalition’s divided stance on the issue. Fianna Fáil also continued to suggest that the coalition would not be competent on security and Northern Ireland. These sentiments were summed up by the Taoiseach, Jack Lynch, when he asked “what would the stand of the coalition government be on national security? Would it be Mr Cosgrave’s own … or would it be Labour’s ‘softly—softly’ approach?”⁶ and by Fianna Fáil’s Sean Moore when he addressed a party meeting in Donnybrook in February1973: “There is one simple issue at stake in this election—if you want peace and security vote Fianna Fáil. Clearly Fianna Fáil under the leadership of Jack Lynch is the one party which can be trusted to contain the subversives, and to preserve peace”⁷

Fianna Fáil hoped that its record on Northern Ireland and its claim that it was the most competent party and the only one to be trusted on Northern Ireland would, in the aftermath of the Offences Against the State (Amendment Act) 1972, the De-
December 1972 bombings in Dublin and the publication of the British White Paper, enable them to consolidate its position within the Dáil. However, there is some evidence to suggest that Fianna Fáil’s concentration on Northern Ireland and security, at the expense of social and economic issues as highlighted by the coalition, was a significant factor in the election outcome. As the election drew closer, Fianna Fáil attempted to win back ground lost to the coalition on social and economic issues (see Irish Times 28 Feb. 1973). Despite last minute references to social issues Lynch and Fianna Fáil placed the North and divisions within the coalition in relation to Northern Ireland as central to its election campaign (Irish Times, 26 Feb. 1973). This enabled the coalition leader, Liam Cosgrave, to challenge Fianna Fáil’s credibility, stating that Northern Ireland was never an election issue but that Fianna Fáil had deliberately attempted to win votes on this issue by forging divisions on an issue where unity was needed (Irish Times, 27 Feb. 1973).

FIANNA FÁIL AND THE SUNNINGDALE COMMUNIQUÉ

Despite the controversial nature of the issues of security and Northern Ireland during the election, Jack Lynch immediately suggested that a bipartisan approach to Northern Ireland might now develop in the aftermath of the election (Irish Times, 2 Mar. 1973) and offered his help in relation to Northern Ireland if the coalition pursued a satisfactory solution (Irish Times, 14, 15 Mar. 1973). Fianna Fáil’s qualified endorsement of the British White Paper on Northern Ireland, published in March 1973, in the hope that the Irish dimension as expressed in a Council of Ireland could be expanded, was seen as encouraging for the new coalition government (Irish Times, 22 Mar. 1973). Lynch had already welcomed the preceding British Green Paper as the basis for progress in the right direction, stating that the forthcoming White Paper must provide “a link between north and south ... so that both parts of Ireland are set on a converging path” (Irish Times 5 Dec. 1972). Fine Gael simply responded to the election accusations on security by highlighting its ability, since taking office, to uphold the institutions of the state, to control lawlessness and disorder and to guarantee the safety of individuals (Liam Cosgrave, Irish Times, 21 May 1973). Although Jack Lynch, as leader of the opposition, continued to suggest that divisions existed within the government on security (Irish Times, 9 May, 1973), as the year progressed he expressed confidence in the future of a bipartisan approach to the North (Irish Times, 19 Oct. 1973).

Lack of information and debate on Sunningdale

In the days immediately following the conclusion of the Sunningdale conference Lynch had stated that “no abrogation to Article 2” of the Constitution could be countenanced (Irish Press, 11 Dec. 1973). He confirmed that his party endorsed a policy for unity based only on peaceful means and sought clarification as to whether the Irish government’s declaration in the Communiqué was merely a statement of that fact or whether it involved an acceptance of the British government’s statement in the Communiqué on the present status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom (Dáil debates 269: 1577-1578, 12 Dec. 1973). He also sought clarification on whether the Communiqué would be placed before the UN as an international
agreement and if so would this be done in totality or in part (Dáil debates 269: 1578, 12 Dec. 1973). Lynch was consistent in emphasising the need for further explanation of the provisions included in the communiqué. His appeared willing to endorse the communiqué, stating that its proposals relating to power sharing seemed to have overall support at that time but the problem lay with the fact that “the significance of that [the Irish government declaration] has never been explained”. He was reluctant to suggest an alternative wording for the Irish government’s statement in relation to the status of Northern Ireland but suggested that a reference to the Irish government’s constitutional position was needed.  

Both Lynch and Joseph Brennan insisted that the opposition was not seeking to make political gain out of the issue despite some accusations that Fianna Fáil had played politics with the agreement (Dáil debates 268: 1609-1610, 12 Dec. 1973). Ruairi Brugha also accused the government of trying to divide the country on the issue by insinuating that Fianna Fáil had not given sufficient support to the Communiqué when seeking more information (Dáil debates 269: 1889-1890, 13 Dec. 1973). Fianna Fáil party whip, Patrick Lalor, also resented the government’s attempts to present the questions raised by Fianna Fáil as well as its attempts to extract more information from the government as evidence that it was attempting to make political gain from the Communiqué. Lalor also denied that there were any divisions within the party on its stance on Sunningdale (Dáil debates 269: 1993, 14 Dec. 1973). Despite the party’s denials of wishing to make political gain from the matter, it was reported that some backbenchers had gotten some political satisfaction from the problems facing the implementation of the Communiqué in the aftermath of Faulkner’s resignation on 7 January 1974. Some were also unhappy at the government’s unsuccessful attempts to appease unionists by ordering the arrests of IRA suspects (see Irish Times, 9 Jan. 1974).

Members of the opposition (for example, Patrick Lalor) also lamented the lack of Dáil time given over to debate the Sunningdale Communiqué. This together with the perceived lack of information offered by the Taoiseach on the Communiqué was a matter of contention for most Fianna Fáil contributors to the debates in the Dáil (for example Lalor, Lynch, Colley). Patrick Lalor accused the government of deliberately withholding information from Fianna Fáil in a way that had made Jack Lynch look inept and as having undermined the pre-existing bipartisan approach on the issue (Dáil debates 269: 1996-1997, 14 Dec. 1973). Former Fianna Fáil Minister for Justice, Des O’Malley, also specifically referred to Cosgrave’s silence in relation to security (Dáil debates 268: 1668, 12 Dec. 1973). George Colley described the non-committal approach of the Taoiseach as to the procedures to be followed on whether the Communiqué and any subsequent agreement will be brought before the Oireachtas (Dáil debates 269: 2012 14 Dec. 1973). Former Fianna Fáil Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Brian Lenihan, criticised the “fudging attitude and ambiguous approach” of the government in relation to the Sunningdale Communiqué. He claimed the government was refusing to clarify ambiguities in the

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8 Jack Lynch on This Week, 17 Feb. 1974, National Archives Ireland (NAI), D/T 2005/7/626B

Former Fianna Fáil Minister, Ruairí Brugha, described the way in which the Sunningdale proposals had been presented “as a take it or leave it package” and said that it was the government’s duty to convince them generally of the merits of the provisions of the Communiqué. However, Cosgrave made it clear to Jack Lynch in a meeting to discuss the Sunningdale proposals that he had not intention of elaborating, publicly or privately on the declaration made on behalf of the government in the Communiqué (Irish Press, 18 Jan. 1974). Cosgrave was unable or unwilling to ease the concerns reported within Fianna Fáil as a result of private assurances given in the course of a telephone conversation (see Irish Times, 15 Jan. 1974) with the Unionist leader, Brian Faulkner, on the declaration in the wake of a court challenge from Kevin Boland (Irish Press, 18 Jan. 1974).

**Issues of contention for Fianna Fáil**

In November 1973 Lynch gave his support to the announcement of a power-sharing administration in Northern Ireland involving the Unionist Party, the SDLP and the Alliance Party:

> We wish the members of these bodies well in their efforts to work for all the people of Northern Ireland ... our immediate priority is to bring about peace with justice in the North and so to bring to an end violence and suffering ... all my efforts while I was Taoiseach in all the consultations I had with successive British Prime Ministers and other representatives of the British Government were directed towards this end (Dáil debates 269: 425-6, 28 Nov. 1973).

As he had done in his previous statements (see for example Irish Times, 19 Oct. 1973), Lynch predicated his support for that process on the establishment of a Council of Ireland “based on mutual respect and tolerance which will allow all Irishmen to co-operate in maintaining peace on this island and to work for the economic prosperity of all its people” (Dáil debates 269: 426, 28 Nov. 1973). His response and that of his party members to the Sunningdale Communiqué of December 1973 was once again welcoming and Lynch offered his party’s assistance in implementing the agreement (Dáil debates 269: 1574, 12 Dec. 1973). However, he emphasised that his support for the Sunningdale Communiqué was conditional, pending the allocation of powers to the Council of Ireland, particularly in respect of law enforcement and human rights (Irish Press, 10 Dec. 1973). Fianna Fáil concentrated on the need for progress in the direction of a Council of Ireland. Lynch’s two main concerns related to the powers of the Council of Ireland, which he insisted must be “executive and harmonising”, and the declaration by the Irish government about the status of Northern Ireland (Dáil debates 269: 1578-1580, 12 Dec. 1973).

The party’s reservations about the Sunningdale Communiqué were somewhat more forcibly expressed by Joseph Brennan. While he conceded that Sunningdale

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9 Ruairí Brugha, speaking to Milford Fianna Fáil Cumann, 1 Feb. 1974, NAI, 2005/7/626
included much of what his party had wanted for some time, he could not be sure
that it was a step in a positive direction. He lamented the possibility that “unification
[had] become a dirty word in this country? Has it become something nobody wants
to mention? ... We all talk about peace and the desirability of peace. Peace at any
price —is that what it means?”(Dáil debates 268, Col.1605, 12 Dec. 1973). He re-
ferred to the choice of language used by Brian Faulkner who he says “believes he
has won. He believes ... that he has got for the first time, as he says, a solemn dec-
laration that we will not interfere with the status of Northern Ireland and its constitu-
tional position” (Dáil debates 268: 1606, 12 Dec. 1973). He stressed the party’s
view that unity must clearly be central to any agreement signed by the government:
“The ultimate unification of this country is of paramount importance in any agree-
ment which anybody concludes on behalf of this country and if there is anybody
who thinks he can denigrate that aspiration or relegate it to oblivion, I am afraid that
we would be very much wasting our time” (Dáil debates 268: 1607, 12 Dec. 1973).
Des O’Malley welcomed the Sunningdale pact but explicitly stated that any further
compromise on the part of the Irish govern-
ment was unacceptable. He doubted the
collation’s “commitment to the national aspirations traditionally held by the great
majority of the Irish nation ... That essen-
tial unity (of the island) cannot be put
asunder by the anti-national semantics of Conor Cruise O’Brien and Garret Fitz-
Gerald” (Irish Times, 14 Jan. 1974).

In what was viewed as stronger language than that used by the Fianna Fáil leader
and as evidence of strong concerns within the party about Sunningdale, Senator
Lenihan argued that the ambiguities contained in the Communiqué had made mat-

Having welcomed the Sunningdale Communiqué in so far as it represented an op-
portunity for reconciliation, Fianna Fáil’s Michael O’Kennedy stressed that respon-
sibility for partition lay with the British government and claimed that the Sunning-
dale communiqué gave the impression “that the matters were discussed in the light
of troubles that have spontaneously emerged in any part of our country because of
certain differences of tradition, attitudes that exist on both sides of the Border and
the need, particularly, to deal with terrorism. There is much more to it than that”
Northern Ireland, O’Kennedy stressed the need to have the British government
commit to share the financial burden of the Council of Ireland (Dáil debates 269:
1825-1826, 13 Dec. 1973). Ruairi Brugha similarly pointed to Britain’s responsibility
in relation to Northern Ireland and argued that two obstacles lay in the way of rec-
conciliation; Britain’s reluctance to disentangle itself from Ireland and unionist refusal
to become involved with the rest of Ireland. He underlined the need for a Council of
Ireland that would overcome these (Dáil debates 269: 1891-1892). In a speech to a
Fianna Fáil Cumann in Milford, Brugha welcomed power sharing as an interim ar-
angement but reiterated the Fianna Fáil established position that the right of any
Lalor confirmed that his party’s position on Sunningdale was motivated by its desire for “a Council of Ireland that works, a Council of Ireland with teeth, a Council of Ireland with responsibility” and to ensure “that the present Irish Government have not compromised our position” (Dáil debates 269: 1994, 14 Dec. 1973). Colley restated his party’s commitment to power sharing in Northern Ireland but emphasised the essential nature, in his party’s view, of the Council of Ireland “the correct model for [which] was the European Economic Community with an independent secretariat, a Council of Ministers and a Parliamentary Assembly” (Dáil debates 269: 2013, 14 Dec. 1973). He envisaged that the application of policing and the European Convention of Human Rights on a North-South basis as dependent upon the creation of the Council of Ireland (Dáil debates 269: 2013, 14 Dec. 1973). He also raised a number of questions about the declarations of both governments in the Communiqué which he described as containing a “potentially dangerous ambiguity” as to whether the Irish government, in the absence of an explicit reference to its claim to sovereignty over Northern Ireland, had in fact abandoned that claim. He also noted that there was no such ambiguity in the British declaration as to its claim to sovereignty over Northern Ireland. If this was the case then he believed it could not expect to be supported by the majority of voters (Dáil debates 269: 2014-2016, 14 Dec. 1973). Colley took the opportunity to disclaim any assertions that Fianna Fáil was soft on the issue of security and reminded the Dáil that the coalition had in fact been guilty of ambivalence in relation to the Offence Against the State (Amendment) Act, 1972 (Dáil debates 269: 2018, 14 Dec. 1973).

Varying attitudes within Fianna Fáil

Lynch’s most overt endorsement of the Sunningdale Communiqué is perhaps seen in his statement in January 1974. Having stressed his concerns about the Irish government’s declaration in the pact, Lynch said that the “the road to Sunningdale was a road, which we had charted when in government and we have continued to support the efforts to bring about a balanced set of proposals that will bring peace with justice to the North”. He made particular reference to the acceptance of the need for a Council of Ireland as being in accordance with his policies while in office (Irish Press, 18 Jan. 1974). Like Lynch and some other Fianna Fáil deputies, George Colley intimated a continuity between Fianna Fáil’s approach to Northern Ireland while in office and the ethos of the Sunningdale Communiqué (Dáil debates 269: 2012, 14 Dec. 1973). But as illustrated in the previous sections there were varying levels of enthusiasm about Sunningdale within Fianna Fáil.

The Fianna Fáil front bench had made it clear that no further concessions in terms of recognising the status of Northern Ireland or changes to articles 2 and 3 of the constitution would be acceptable to them. Their impression that Faulkner was satisfied with the outcome of his telephone conversion with Cosgrave had increased

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10 Ruairí Brugha, speaking to Milford Fianna Fáil Cumann, 1 Feb. 1974, NAI, 2005/7/626
their desire for further clarification (Irish Times, 16 Jan. 1974). Jack Lynch main-
tained his position of support for Sunningdale with reservations, explicitly stating
that so long as the government continued to pursue the same policy as he had
when in government he would support that approach. However, he would not sup-
port any policy that would set back progress towards the peaceful coming together
Lynch’s concentration on the need for clarification, which meant he could only give
qualified support to Sunningdale together with tougher language from his close al-
lies such as Des O’Malley, were apparent deliberate attempts to strike a balance
between the leadership’s somewhat more favourable response to Sunningdale and
the increasingly pessimistic views about it among the wider party and its supporters
in advance of what was predicted would be a tough party ard-fheis (convention; see
Irish Times, 22 Jan. 1974). Lynch’s own handling of the issue was subject to de-
bate in the run up to the Fianna Fáil ard-fheis in February 1974 with the general
theme to emerge from national conventions, as described by Jack Lynch, “a deep-
felt concern that our national aspirations must include a free Ireland, united by con-
sent and committed to social freedom and equality in all areas” (Irish Times, 12

As a result, pressure mounted from within the party to declare an outright rejection
of the Sunningdale Agreement, although Lynch did his best to resist this (Irish
Times, 23 Jan. 1974). About 30 TDs and senators, addressing a Fianna Fáil par-
liamentary party meeting on Sunningdale, referred to increased dissatisfaction at
constituency level about the Agreement and the lack of clarification from the gov-

The opposition’s issues regarding the lack of clarification in relation to the Irish gov-
ernment’s statement in paragraph 5 of the Communiqué continued for a number of
months. Towards the end of February 1974, Jack Lynch again referred to the res-
ervations that he had and the failure of the Taoiseach to act to remove these reser-
vations even in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s judgment that the government
had not acted unconstitutionally in signing the Sunningdale Communiqué (Dáil de-
bates 270: 1679, 27 Feb. 1974). It was 13 March before the Taoiseach addressed
the issue by making a statement in the Dáil. Cosgrave confirmed that

The declaration was of course referring to the de facto status of Northern Ireland, that
is to say the factual position, to which reference is made in recent judgments in the
High Court and the Supreme Court. The factual position of Northern Ireland is that it
is within the United Kingdom and my Government accept this as a fact. This declara-
tion, I believe, is in accordance with and follows from the resolve of all the democratic
parties in the Republic that the unity of Ireland is to be achieved only by peaceful
means and by consent (Dáil debates 271: 8, 13 Mar. 1974).

George Colley welcomed the Taoiseach’s belated statement that the de jure posi-
tion of both governments remained unchanged. In doing so he gave his support to
the Council of Ireland and power sharing in Northern Ireland (Dáil debates 271: 9-
12, 13 Mar. 1974). This statement did generally satisfy Fianna Fáil sentiments but
some dissent and concerns remained with the Fianna Fáil backbencher, Major Viv-
ion de Valera responding to Cosgrave’s statement that he had come “perilously near recognising, without qualification, a de jure right of a section of the Irish people to maintain partition” (Irish Times, 14 Mar. 1974).

**Fianna Fáil on the collapse of Sunningdale**

By April 1974, in the aftermath of the damaging Boland case, the British general election where 11 anti-Sunningdale unionists won seats in Northern Ireland (Irish Times, 2 Mar. 1974) and a march to Stormont by 2,000 people led by eight of the 11 anti-Sunningdale unionists (Irish Times, 11 Mar. 1974), Jack Lynch suggested that since progress had been so slow and that the implementation of the Council of Ireland did not look imminent that an alternative all party convention might meet to fill the vacuum.¹¹

The Taoiseach’s announcement to the Dáil in May 1974 that it understood the reasons proffered by the Northern Ireland Executive as to why the implementation of the Council of Ireland was not immediately possible was met with great disappointment by Lynch, but having stated his concerns and belief in the inalienable right of the people of Ireland to decide its own destiny he agreed not to do anything that would stall progress towards peace (Dáil debates 272: 2039-2041, 22 May 1974). By the time the collapse of Sunningdale was accepted Lynch was much more critical of Fine Gael on Northern Ireland. He questioned reported government plans to modify articles 2 and 3 of the constitution as being designed as further “repeated assurances” to the northern majority and which only made “those who were being re-assured more obstinate and demanding” (Dáil debates 273: 1587, 26 June 1974). He adopted a firm stance on unity saying

> To imply, however, that we should cease - and I assert there was that implication - to aspire to a united Ireland by peaceful means in co-operation, understanding and justice because of violence is, in itself, a concession to those who pursue that violence. I am certain that the people in this part of Ireland do not want to abandon that aspiration. Above all, they do not want to abandon the minority in the North to the kind of life, the kind of subjection and domination they have suffered there for over 50 years. If that were the case, the minority in the North could hardly be blamed if they saw no way out of their dilemma other than to turn to the men of violence (Dáil debates 273: 1583, 26 June 1974)

These statements by Lynch and the level of dissent within Fianna Fáil which Lynch had managed to contain, in the absence of the need to unite the party behind a Dáil vote on an agreement on Northern Ireland, suggests that cross-party agreement on the agreement that had been envisaged in the Sunningdale Communiqué may have represented a real challenge. Substantive cross-party and intra-party dissent on Northern Ireland was avoided due ultimately to the collapse of Sunningdale and the fact that it did not lead to the envisaged agreement.

¹¹ Interview with Jack Lynch on RTÉ, World at One, 28 Apr. 1974, NAI, 2005/7/629C.
CONCLUSION

Many Oireachtas deputies referred to the existence of a bipartisan approach to Northern Ireland in the preceding years but the debates surrounding the Offence Against the State (Amendment) Act in 1972, the general election in 1973 and the Sunningdale Communiqué in December 1973 suggested that there were serious limitations to the operation of a bipartisan position on Northern Ireland. Despite many oral statements of a bipartisan approach to Northern Ireland, that the issue was above politics, Fianna Fáil, in particular, was more than willing to employ the issues of Northern Ireland and security for political gain in an election scenario. Security remained a source of controversy and at the centre of debate between the parties throughout 1973, as did the perceived lack of information supplied in relation to Sunningdale.

Lynch and those closest to him in Fianna Fáil attempted to maintain a bipartisan approach, which only really meant not criticising the government and not rejecting the Communiqué outright, while the Sunningdale proposals maintained the potential for progress. He came under considerable pressure from within his party to reject the provisions included in the Communiqué in the absence of clarification on the governments’ status declarations.

The perception of a lack of information from the government led to accusations of fudging and of attempting to divide the country. It did, however, preclude Fianna Fáil from explicitly rejecting any of the aspects of Sunningdale, thus ensuring that divisions on the Communiqué in the Republic did not interfere with attempts at progress in Northern Ireland. The subsequent failure of Sunningdale, conceded by May/June 1974, meant that the government never had to enter substantive debate on Northern Ireland with Fianna Fáil. More importantly for Fianna Fáil it allowed the party to maintain a qualified position on Sunningdale. The avoidance of substantive debate on Northern Ireland maintained an appearance of a bipartisan approach to Northern Ireland.

The close inspection of the debates relating to the Sunningdale Communiqué contained in this paper cast serious doubt on the claim that a bipartisan approach to Northern Ireland prevailed in the period. However, the reality that a bipartisan approach to Northern Ireland did not exist had been masked by Lynch’s wish not to disrupt the potential for political progress in Northern Ireland. Lynch’s ability to maintain the dissent within his own party on the Communiqué maintained an appearance of bipartisanship. Moreover, this illusion of bipartisanship was enabled by the avoidance of any substantive debate on Northern Ireland, due mainly to the ultimate collapse of the Sunningdale process, which meant that a divisive Dáil vote on Sunningdale and Northern Ireland was averted. These together enabled Lynch and others, despite the evidence to the contrary supplied by a closer look, to maintain the myth that a bipartisan approach to Northern Ireland existed.

But had Sunningdale progressed to the next stage of an agreement to be put before the Dáil, it would have been very difficult for Lynch to unite his party behind the agreement and it would have been unlikely that Fianna Fáil would have resisted the
opportunity to gain politically from its republican constituency on the issue. In fact it is not clear that Lynch would have supported an agreement in the absence of a reference to the Irish government’s commitment to unity in its declaration on Northern Ireland. As such, the agreement could have potentially been very divisive for Fianna Fáil.

A subsequent Dáil vote on an agreement involving a statement by the Irish government on the constitutional position of Northern Ireland incorporating the principle of consent would undoubtedly have finally dispelled any myth of a bipartisan approach to Northern Ireland and exposed the lack of consensus among the political parties in the Republic, particularly on the issues of the principles of consent and the recognition of Northern Ireland. It is clear that a consensus on Northern Ireland did not exist among the political parties in the Republic in 1973-74. It is suggested here that the absence of such a consensus would have had serious implications for the ratification and implementation of the agreement envisaged at Sunningdale if such an agreement had materialised between the governments and the parties in the North.

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