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Diplomacy via Press Release: North-South Relations from 1959–64

Abstract: McCann provides an analysis of how relations developed in the aftermath of Seán Lemass becoming Taoiseach in June 1959. Focusing on the Unionist government, he details how the new economic and political approach from the Irish government wrong footed the Brookeborough administration in Belfast. As well as looking at the internal debates within the cabinet, McCann highlights that the arrival of Terence O’Neill in March 1963 did not immediately represent a new approach from Unionism towards the Irish government. The failure to create coherent policy on co-operation left O’Neill politically vulnerable, McCann argues. This weakness was exploited by rivals such as Brian Faulkner, who used North-South co-operation to appeal to the liberal wing of Unionism, who by 1964 were increasingly disillusioned with the O’Neill administration.

The fact remains, however, that so long as those in authority demand Ulster, improved relationship will be very difficult to establish because this demand cuts right at our nerve centre.¹

Northern Ireland Prime Minister,
J.M. Andrews to Major General Hugh Montgomery

These private thoughts delivered by Northern Ireland’s wartime Prime Minister at the height of World War II are indicative of just how penetrating the issue of the constitutional recognition was for Unionist politicians. At a time of total war with Nazi Germany and not long after the Belfast Blitz, a major concern for Andrews was the fact that the relatively new Irish constitution, Bunreacht na hÉireann, contained within it a territorial claim on Northern Ireland. This drive to maintain constitutional integrity would be a constant for his successor Lord Brookborough, who also took on the charge of facing down constitutional challenge from the Irish government. Whilst Southern Ireland pursued a policy of vocal anti-partitionism, it was relatively easy and at the time electorally beneficial for a Unionist leader to rebut the Nationalist challenge. In tandem with the rhetoric, the relatively favourable economic position of Northern Ireland compared to the Irish Republic allowed political leaders in Belfast to draw attention the higher living standards that the province enjoyed within the United Kingdom. Yet, by 1959, both of these pillars of the Unionist argument came under challenge with the ascension of Seán Lemass as Taoiseach, bringing a new approach to Northern Ireland and the economy.

1.1 Cautiously into the nineteen-sixties

As Eamon deValera brought the curtain down on his long 21-year period as Taoiseach, the debate over the positions and temperament of his successor was debated within the Northern Ireland media. The change in leader in the Irish Republic received a guarded welcome as the Belfast Telegraph ran positive editorials stressing Lemass’ moderate instincts and greater interest in economic affairs. In their editorial, the paper referred to Lemass as a ‘man of action’ with the qualities of an ‘efficient company director’.² Such positive comments from Unionist friendly papers would give Lemass hope that a new departure in North-South co-operation was possible. In attempting to change the conversation between the two