The Politics of Co-operation: North-South Relations from 1965–66

Abstract: The political manoeuvring within the Unionist government starts off this chapter. McCann argues that the Faulkner/O’Neill rivalry was essential in provoking a change in policy in Belfast. The secrecy, with which O’Neill kept his invitation to Lemass, is cited as the main driver of opposition from within Unionism. The presidential style of leadership that O’Neill adopted is contrasted with the more open approach adopted by Faulkner on this issue. This sense of distance allowed O’Neill to remain aloof from the mainstream of his party, whilst, Faulkner delivered the big co-operation initiatives in areas such as tourism and electricity.

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The lull in exchanges between Lemass and O’Neill, coinciding with the lack of political activity, generally would leave even top civil servants and politicians astonished at what was about to happen in January 1965. The secretive way in which the meeting was set up was one of the major sources of opposition to this new policy of improving relations with the Irish government. The fact that both leaders wanted to keep the organisation of the summit a secret put civil servants in an increasingly important position. The agenda for the summit and the ensuing co-operation had huge input from civil servants. The co-operation that did happen would ultimately be subject to political pressures and as sectarian violence escalated throughout 1966 placed pressure on O’Neill’s leadership making formal co-operation with the Irish government a politically untenable policy.

As Faulkner was preparing proposals to bring to the cabinet, O’Neill was preparing to issue an invitation to Lemass for a meeting. In setting up the meeting, O’Neill enlisted the help of his private secretary, Jim Malley, and the Secretary of the Department of Finance in Dublin, T.K. Whitaker. Whitaker, Malley and O’Neill had formed a strong friendship as a result of meetings on visits to the World Bank. Whitaker viewed O’Neill as a different type of Unionist leader who stood out in the North by not having the same roots within the community, which in Whitaker’s view allowed O’Neill to rise above narrow party interests. As a result of these meetings that O’Neill decided to approach Whitaker, in order to convey the invitation to Lemass. Both of these civil servants were central in facilitating contact between the two Premiers.

On 4 January, as Faulkner’s co-operation proposals appeared in the newspapers, Malley was dispatched to Dublin to meet Whitaker for lunch in the Shelbourne Hotel to convey the invitation. The rapid change in the space of a month from no direct co-operation to full prime ministerial meetings would leave his party bewildered. The mistake of keeping the invitation to Lemass a secret would begin to erode his leadership among his parliamentary colleagues. An extract from O’Neill’s memoirs on Malley’s journey to Dublin illustrates the level of secrecy that surrounded even approaching Whitaker with the invitation, as he recalls when Malley boarded the train that Arthur Algeo, the head of the