



Centre for International Borders Research



Institute for British-Irish Studies

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in a divided island**



**THE REALMS OF PRACTICAL POLITICS: NORTH-
SOUTH CO-OPERATION ON THE ERNE HYDRO-
ELECTRIC SCHEME, 1942-57**

Michael Kennedy

Project supported by the EU Programme for Peace and Reconciliation and administered by the Higher Education Authority, 2004-06

WORKING PAPER 25

**THE REALMS OF PRACTICAL POLITICS: NORTH-SOUTH CO-
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MFPP Working Papers
No. 25, 2006

(also printed as
IBIS working paper no. 75)

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ABSTRACT

THE REALMS OF PRACTICAL POLITICS: NORTH-SOUTH CO-OPERATION ON THE ERNE HYDRO ELECTRIC SCHEME, 1942-57

From 1942 to 1957 North and South co-operated to enable the Irish Electricity Supply Board to build the most effective power plant possible on the River Erne in southern territory by ensuring that, through dredging and various civil engineering works in northern territory, the Erne lakes were able to provide sufficient water flow to power the turbines. This project offered significant attractions to interests on both sides of the border: electricity to the South, and drainage of the Erne catchment area to the North. It took from 1942 to 1950 for Dublin and Belfast to come to an agreement on the manner of co-operation over the Erne. Finally, in May 1950, parallel legislation introduced in the Dáil and in Stormont on the same day led to the Erne Drainage and Development Act which allowed the Electricity Supply Board and the Northern Ireland Ministry of Finance to sign an agreement to facilitate co-operation in September 1950. This paper argues that, for the 1940s and 1950s, and given the strongly anti-partitionist mood in Irish foreign policy, the agreement over the Erne scheme marked a major step forward for relations between Dublin and Belfast and provided a workable template for co-operation.

Publication information

Revised version of a paper presented at a workshop as part of the programme *Mapping frontiers, plotting pathways: routes to North-South cooperation in a divided island*, Newman House, University College Dublin, 17 January 2005. The programme is funded by the Special EU Programmes Body through the Higher Education Authority over the period 2004-06.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Michael Kennedy is executive editor of the Royal Irish Academy's *Documents on Irish Foreign Policy* series, and co-editor of its first five volumes. Previously he lectured at Queen's University Belfast. He has published numerous articles on Irish diplomatic and political history, and is author of *Division and consensus: the politics of cross-border relations in Ireland 1921–1969* (Institute of Public Administration, 2000) and of *Ireland and the League of Nations, 1919-46* (Irish Academic Press, 1996); co author of *Ireland and the Council of Europe: from isolation towards integration*, with Eunan O'Halpin (Council of Europe Publishing, 2000); and joint editor of *Ireland, Europe and the Marshall Plan*, with Till Geiger (Four Courts Press, 2004), *Irish Foreign Policy 1919–1966: from independence to internationalism*, with JM Skelly (Dublin, 2000), and *Obligations and responsibilities: Ireland and the United Nations, 1955-2005*, with Deirdre McMahon (Institute of Public Administration, 2005). He has recently been appointed Adjunct Associate Professor of History in UCD.

**THE REALMS OF PRACTICAL POLITICS:
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INTRODUCTION

The Erne river and lake system comprises a catchment area of 1,560 square miles, 830 of which are in the Republic and 730 of which are in Northern Ireland.¹ Both Erne lakes are situated in Northern Ireland and, via Belleek in Fermanagh, they flow into the sea from the river Erne at Ballyshannon in Donegal. I would like to begin by sketching the issues facing Dublin and Belfast over the Erne system and introducing the manner in which these issues led to North and South co-operating when the Irish Electricity Supply Board (ESB) began building a hydroelectric power station on the river Erne.

For Northern Ireland, the Erne lakes represented a long-term problem for regional drainage. The lands adjoining the lake were subject to sudden seasonal flooding, destroying the crops and thus the livelihoods of local farmers. An attempt in the 1930s at a cross-border solution to the flooding foundered when neither Dublin nor Belfast would underwrite costly relief works necessary to control the waters of the lakes. From the sluice gates at Belleek, the Lough Erne Drainage Board, formed in the 1880s, continued to set water levels. It would take more than recurrent seasonal flooding to convince Dublin and Belfast to undertake relief drainage work on the Erne. The flooding of the lands adjoining Upper and Lower Lough Erne continued.

A projected rise in demand for electricity in the postwar years in the South changed Dublin's views on the Erne. The ESB required increased generating capacity to meet projected customer demand into the 1950s. Consequently, in 1942, planning began on the construction of a hydroelectric power station on the River Erne. Two generating stations would be built, one at Cliff, below Belleek, and the other at Cathleen's Falls, near Ballyshannon. The combined output of the two stations would be between 50 and 80 megawatts. The station would be second only to Ardacrusha on the river Shannon in size.

DEVISING A BLUEPRINT

Two plans were proposed for the Erne scheme. The first, known as the "minor scheme", involved no work in Northern Ireland. It would use the uncontrolled flow of the river Erne to drive turbines to generate power. The second, the "major scheme", hinged on the ESB undertaking dredging and civil engineering works on the Erne lakes, both of which were within the territory of Northern Ireland. These would regu-

¹ A longer and more detailed version of the events covered in this paper can be found in Kennedy, 2000.

late the water supply from the lakes, ensuring the controlled release of water to work the turbines in the power stations. The "major scheme" would convert the minor scheme into a significantly more powerful plant, but to carry it out would require the consent and co-operation of the Belfast government. The "major scheme" interested the Northern government because the ESB informed them that it would be willing to pay for the dredging and drainage work required to make the Erne lakes suitable for supplying water to the power stations. This work would also solve the flooding problems around the lakes. It seemed self-evident that North and South would benefit and that both should co-operate. However, with a southern semi-state body offering to undertake work within Northern Irish territory, the agreement of Belfast was necessary. Cross-border co-operation on the Erne was by no means a foregone conclusion.

John Coakley and Liam O'Dowd (2005) argue that "the researcher will hunt in vain in cabinet papers in Dublin and Belfast for evidence of significant cross-border links at political or even at administrative level" in the pre-1965 period. The arguments in this paper are very interesting, but this is a surprising conclusion. The successful completion of the Erne hydroelectric and drainage scheme, through an agreement between the ESB in the South and the Northern Ireland Ministry of Finance, was of considerable importance for leading politicians North and South. It, and the cross-border contact necessary for its completion, received cabinet backing in Dublin and Belfast. The Erne Hydro-Electric scheme was a significant moment in the pre-1965 history of cross-border relations. But, in general, Irish historians have ignored it, possibly because of their lack of interest in the history of technology and technopolitics.

I would also suggest that examining the Erne scheme illustrates that Coakley and O'Dowd's term "committed non-co-operation" at official and ministerial level is perhaps too strong, though I see why they use this term (see Coakley and O'Dowd, 2005). It did apply in some areas, particularly in the failed attempts at the development of an all-Ireland tourism strategy to the mid-1960s, but I would suggest that there were established, though quiet, civil service links on a far wider range of cross-border matters in the pre-1965 period than they maintain, the Erne Scheme being just one case. An attitude of "committed non-co-operation" was, however, the public face adopted by officials because of the ritualised cross-border lambasting to which politicians on both sides of the border had descended.

OVERVIEW

The chronology of the Lough Erne scheme is long and drawn out and it is best to review it before concentrating on some specific issues. ESB planning began on the Erne scheme in 1942, but the first cross-border contacts were not made until 1943. Not until early 1946 did Belfast agree to allow the dredging by the ESB to take place within Northern Irish territory. An act had to be passed in Westminster to allow the Belfast government to participate in schemes outside the territory of Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act was passed in July 1947. Joint legislation for the Erne Scheme was then drawn up and was simultane-

ously presented in the Dáil and in Stormont on 8 May 1950. The Erne agreement between the ESB and the Ministry of Finance was finally signed on 4 September 1950. Work began on the drainage and excavation in late 1952. The Cathleen's Falls Station had come into operation earlier that year and the station at Cliff came into operation in late 1954. The new control of lake water levels began in June 1956 and work on the Erne drainage and hydroelectric scheme was completed by 1957.

So we are looking at a 15-year period where a significant development took place in cross-border relations. This was the establishment of a working system of cross-border contact, where semi-state bodies, ministries and officials from North and South co-operated with the sanction of their governments. The Cabinet agreement, particularly in Belfast, on the scheme is highly significant. This was the first occasion where on its own initiative the Northern Ireland Cabinet agreed that there were benefits to cross-border co-operation. It should be recalled that they did not have to agree to this co-operation taking place. Here I would question Coakley and O'Dowd's assertion that pre-1965 "collaborative North-South enterprises [were] in areas where co-operation could hardly be avoided" (Coakley and O'Dowd, 2005). Dublin was reluctant, but ultimately willing, to go ahead with the Erne project without the involvement of Northern Ireland and the divisions in the Belfast Cabinet over co-operation with the South were such that Northern Prime Minister Sir Basil Brooke had to work hard to obtain his colleagues' agreement on the scheme. Co-operation over the Erne scheme could have been avoided on political grounds and on future occasions, such as over cross-border trade in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Stormont did explicitly refuse to sanction co-operation with Dublin on political grounds even though it had agreed that it would be in Northern Ireland's interests economically (see Kennedy, 1997).

Close official-level contacts developed during the progress of the Erne scheme. I was struck at the warmth of much of the official correspondence between civil servants in Dublin and Belfast as they drew up the Erne agreement. Following a successful meeting in Dublin in March 1949, Ivan Woods of the Northern Ireland Ministry of Commerce wrote to DP Shanagher of the Department of Industry and Commerce in Dublin to thank him "for the welcome which we so greatly enjoyed [and] the friendly and liberal reception which was given to us".² His one regret was that "under the present conditions it would be virtually impossible to equal your hospitality should your party come to visit us" but he hoped that the next meeting could be held in Belfast as "I think I am correct in assuming that there are several who would like to come up here for a visit". Shanagher's reply showed how the Dublin-Belfast relationship was developing; the Dublin team hoped to make it to Belfast and "would very much like to renew the acquaintance with you and the other members of the party which had such a good beginning recently".³

² National Archives of Ireland (hereafter NAI) Department of Transport and Power (hereafter DTP) 11/3, 8 March 1949.

³ NAI DTP 11/3, 10 March 1949.

There is also evidence of growing warmth at ministerial level, but it is not so overt. When it seemed that the Erne scheme could also provide power to Northern Ireland, Northern Minister of Commerce, Sir Roland Nugent, told RF Browne of the ESB "how keenly I appreciate the readiness which you have shown ... in making available to us, should the need arise, additional supplies of electricity in our area".⁴ Nugent saw "in this readiness a good omen for the future in which I believe we may be able to develop to our mutual advantage in the field of electricity supply a considerable measure of co-operation". Nugent was writing on his own initiative. Such sentiments, coming direct from a minister of the Northern Irish government, carried considerable weight. When I interviewed Liam Cosgrave on the Great Northern Railway purchase he recalled how initial caution and coldness gave way to warmth between the delegations of Northern and Southern ministers.⁵ There were limits to this camaraderie. The late Paddy Lynch vividly remembered Brian Faulkner's comment on the opening of the Aer Lingus office in Belfast in the 1960's that it was "all very well, but we can't have too much of this".⁶ However the examples of good relations are repeated in files on official cross-border co-operation up to the 1970's. I do not discount them as mere political tittle-tattle and they certainly led me to question the applicability in blanket terms of Coakley and O'Dowd's (2005) description of cross-border relations as displaying "political and administrative aloofness".

The Erne project shows how cross-border co-operation could be carried out despite partition, the existence of the border and the political perspectives they both raised, in particular the strong anti-partitionist streak in Irish foreign policy in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The title of this paper "The realms of practical politics", a quote from Northern Ireland Minister of Finance, John Maynard Sinclair, when dealing with the Erne scheme, captures the spirit in which the final scheme was undertaken.⁷ Maynard Sinclair was initially opposed to the scheme, but ultimately came round to seeing its benefits for Northern Ireland, though he was to die before those benefits became apparent. Dublin and Belfast worked together on the Erne because for both governments the construction of the power station reflected a win-win scenario where both would benefit, though in different ways, from the associated works. But co-operation on the Erne scheme did not come naturally to the Belfast government. The Northern Ireland Cabinet feared that Dublin's ultimate intention might be to put pressure on Northern electricity supplies and even that it might be used as a step to Irish unity. However, Dublin saw co-operation purely in economic rather than in political or anti-partitionist terms.

The history of the Lough Erne scheme is intrinsically linked with partition and the border. When Belfast and Dublin decided to enter "the realms of practical politics" over the Erne scheme the existence of the border created the nature of the problem they faced, in that in a 32-County Ireland or under the Union the construction of the

⁴ NAI DTP FP 19/7, 7 January 1947.

⁵ Interview with Liam Cosgrave, Dublin, November 1998.

⁶ Interview with Professor Patrick Lynch, Dublin, January 1997.

⁷ Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereafter PRONI) COM 58/1/113.

Erne Scheme would have involved local authorities rather than governments. The border now provided the context, mental and physical, through which Dublin and Belfast confronted their individual and mutual needs for the scheme. Partition framed the mindsets of those involved. Yet, when negotiations and technical discussions began, the border became a given, part and parcel of the overall issue, and the delegations worked around it or took it into account. It was a part of the problem that had to be overcome. As a major influence on the conduct of the negotiations leading to the completion of the Erne scheme, it threw up problems, but was never a stumbling block, never a problem that could not be surmounted. The border and partition conditioned the responses of the parties involved to the Erne scheme. Yet, they never saw the border, despite its “master symbol status”, as insurmountable; it could be overcome.⁸

POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Sir Basil Brooke, the Minister of Commerce and Prime Minister of Northern Ireland from 1943, was a strong supporter of the Erne scheme. It was not that he wanted to improve relations with the South, far from it. It was matters closer to home that concerned him. He was MP for Lisnaskea in the Erne region. A pragmatic politician, Brooke was aware of the needs of the farmers in his constituency and saw the benefit of the drainage scheme to them. A farmer from Lisnaskea who wrote to Brooke explained the political significance of the drainage question on the Erne lakes. He told him that “the unionists of this area are turned most hostile to the government” as the Lough Erne drainage board had shown no consideration for the grievances of local farmers after they lost crops through flooding.⁹ A further local concern was the construction of a Royal Air Force seaplane base on the lake at Castle Archdale. The water levels necessary for the RAF to operate would flood the land of the farmers. So local and strategic interests in Brooke’s constituency began to have an impact on the Northern Irish government’s perspective on the Erne scheme. As the Prime Minister, the local MP and the local landowner, Brooke could not allow discontent to arise amongst his constituents. It was clear in Belfast that co-operation with Dublin was required because “no drainage in Northern Ireland territory can be really effective unless the water can be run off in much greater volume by increasing the channel capacity of the outlet in the Free State”.¹⁰ Brooke sought to juggle local and strategic interests with the benefits that the ESB scheme would bring to Northern Ireland in order to successfully play off and resolve the many issues that now surrounded the Erne scheme. But he faced considerable opposition within his Cabinet.

The Belfast cabinet was divided over co-operation with Dublin. Cabinet heavyweight Maynard Sinclair was against the plan, as was William Grant, the Minister for Public Security, who considered that “it would be politically inexpedient to agree with the

⁸ Coakley and O’Dowd, 2005: 3.

⁹ PRONI COM/58/1/113, Coffey to Brooke, 25 April 1943.

¹⁰ PRONI COM/58/1/113, Shepherd – Scott, 5 July 1943.

proposal” as Northern Ireland “would be retarded by a dependence on supplies from outside sources”.¹¹ The proposal to co-operate with Dublin on the Erne scheme would not have an easy journey through the Northern Irish cabinet.

Brooke, conscious of what was at stake in his constituency, was having none of this dissent and objection. Diplomatically, he “fully recognised the force of the political objections to the proposals”, but argued that if the negotiations were solely between the ESB and the Northern Ireland Electricity Board (NIEB) then the matter “would be removed from the political sphere”.¹² With Brooke both Minister for Commerce and Prime Minister, there was much heavier weight behind the Ministry of Commerce and it could afford to take on Maynard Sinclair and the Ministry of Finance at cabinet level. Commerce presented Maynard Sinclair with the alternatives of agreeing to the scheme or rejecting it and thus going against the Prime Minister’s wishes and antagonising his constituents. The choice was simple: Finance could agree to the drainage plans, or disagree and incur the wrath of the Prime Minister.

Dublin approved opening discussions with Northern authorities on the Erne scheme in August 1943. Seán Lemass, Minister for Industry and Commerce, piloted the proposal through Cabinet. He told his colleagues that the scheme would go ahead with the involvement of the Northern Irish authorities or it would not go ahead at all. This essential information was never known in Belfast, where Brooke’s government felt that if they did not agree to co-operate over the Erne scheme Dublin would go ahead without them and remove forever the chance of dealing comprehensively with the drainage problem around the Erne lakes. There was comparatively little debate on the Erne plan in Dublin. It was in Belfast that the real battles were fought out.

A collective cabinet agreement was required in Belfast to give permission to the ESB to proceed. Brooke, who was an astute manager of his cabinet, said that all Dublin wanted to know was that the Northern Irish were not against the plan. It was a far more political and diplomatic answer than coming out definitely in favour of the plan and would finally allow progress to be made.

The ESB firmly committed to a hydro-electric plant on the Erne in May 1944 and formally approached the NIEB that September, proposing that 20 megawatts of power would be set aside for Northern Irish use. The Ministry of Commerce calculated the savings to Northern Ireland and argued that the plan be accepted. The winter of 1944–5 saw the ESB and the NIEB plan dredging schemes and swap plans. Progress was at last being made. Seán Lemass, opening the second reading of the Electricity (Supply) (Amendment) Bill in January 1945, gave great prominence to the Erne scheme, stating that the ESB had “indicated certain directions in which

¹¹ PRONI COM/58/1/113, extract from cabinet conclusion, 3 August 1943.

¹² PRONI COM/58/1/113, extract from cabinet conclusion, 3 August 1943.

the co-operation of the Northern Ireland authorities would be mutually advantageous".¹³

With the Southern authorities moving ahead, it only remained for the Northern Irish cabinet to finally agree to co-operate with Dublin on the Erne scheme. Brooke acted in a characteristically pragmatic manner, selling the scheme to his doubtful colleagues through the prospect of more economical electricity prices and the easing of the large-scale drainage problems on the Erne lakes. His colleagues remained doubtful. Maynard Sinclair brought in a new blocking measure by proposing consultations with the Air Ministry in London before a final decision was taken on the scheme. William Grant at the Ministry of Labour felt that Northern Ireland should primarily rely on her own resources before committing herself to any reliance on the South. A recurring fear was that if the province was to rely too heavily on the South for electricity then Dublin could cut off electricity supplies to the province at a whim and so gain a stranglehold over Northern Ireland.

The next move from the Northern Irish perspective was revealing. Maynard Sinclair wrote to the Secretary of State for Air in London on the Erne scheme. He called the scheme a question of "importance to the government of Northern Ireland" because of its "considerable political significance".¹⁴ The minister made clear that the Northern Irish cabinet was unable to come to a definite decision on the scheme and outlined in revealing terms the cabinet's dilemma. Coming from the man tipped to be Brooke's successor and from one of the leading opponents to the Erne scheme, the letter is important:

What concerns us most at the moment is that the Eire scheme presents us with a heaven-sent opportunity to ameliorate, if not cure, serious flooding, which is a long standing grievance of the local farmers in the area. When this drainage problem was examined on previous occasions, it was ruled out because of excessive cost. The Eire government, for their own ends, of course, have now intimated their willingness to bear the greater part of this cost. You will appreciate therefore that we are naturally attracted by this feature of the scheme.

Brooke was willing to deal pragmatically with the scheme and to accept it for similar reasons, but Maynard Sinclair had great difficulty dealing with Dublin, even if it was in Northern Ireland's interests. Maynard Sinclair had seen the crucial importance of co-operation for Stormont. If the ESB undertook their "minor plan" which did not involve civil engineering works in Northern Ireland "the effect from our point of view would be the probable end for all time of any hope of ameliorating the serious flooding conditions" of the Erne region. Maynard Sinclair's views can be gauged from his thoughts as to what might happen if Ireland went ahead without Northern Irish involvement. The RAF might find "that the Eire authorities might lower the Lough level whether you or we liked it or not ... it would also be possible for them, by keeping the sluices closed to cause even more serious flooding than that which we have to

¹³ *Dáil debates* 95, col. 1518, 24 January 1945.

¹⁴ PRONI COM/58/1/113, 20 March 1945.

contend [with] at present". It was his overwhelming lack of trust in the Dublin government that had motivated Maynard Sinclair. But the RAF had no high priority plans for their Lough Erne base after the war and the Air Ministry replied that "the major scheme can have our general blessing".¹⁵ In the meantime, the Ministry of Commerce, now under the charge of Sir Roland Nugent, had irrevocably come to the opinion that it would be desirable to participate in the ESB scheme.

IMPLEMENTING THE SCHEME

By the autumn of 1945 the ESB commenced construction work without the explicit agreement of Northern Ireland, this despite Lemass's reassurances to the Cabinet in Dublin. Worryingly for Northern Ireland, the ESB tenders made provision for the minor scheme and Belfast saw it as proof that since the Northern Irish could not reach agreement amongst themselves, the ESB had gone ahead without them. Finally, in January 1946, the Northern Irish cabinet accepted the principle of co-operation with the Irish authorities on the "major scheme" and its associated civil engineering work within Northern Irish territory. Almost a quarter of a century after the foundation of Northern Ireland, its government, always suspicious of its southern neighbour, had taken the first steps towards openly co-operating with the Dublin government. The argument in favour of accepting the ESB plan was made by its erstwhile opponent, Maynard Sinclair. Maynard Sinclair had possibly been won over to the scheme because William Scott had moved to become the permanent secretary at Finance with the retirement of Wilifred Spender. Now, permanent secretaries who tended to support limited co-operation with Dublin ran both Commerce and Finance. Maynard Sinclair was supported by Brooke, who headed off opposition by accepting the principle of co-operation but making it clear for the record that he had "some doubts about the political aspect of co-operation with the Eire government".¹⁶ Reverend Robert Moore, the Minister for Agriculture, and Sir Roland Nugent, the Minister for Commerce fell in behind Brooke; only the Minister for Education, Samuel Hall-Thompson, expressed continuing doubts on the electrical value of the scheme, but eventually joined his colleagues in support of co-operation because of the drainage programme.

Technical discussions continued through June 1946 to map out the required changes to infrastructure along the lakeshore. A serious problem emerged in mid-June. Under section 4(4) of the Government of Ireland Act (1920) Northern Ireland had no power to enter into any commitments for work affecting matters outside its territorial area. To do so would require special legislation from Westminster. The Government of Ireland Act had been expected to be a temporary act at best and the 1947 Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act was part of the ongoing and piecemeal revision of the act. It extended the powers of the government of Northern Ireland by devolving further power to the Belfast. Under the 1920 act, the proposed Dublin and Belfast governments had been confined to joint activities on their re-

¹⁵ PRONI COM/58/1/113, Street to Maynard Sinclair, 1 June 1945.

¹⁶ PRONI COM/58/1/113, extract from cabinet conclusions, 3 January 1946.

spective sides of the border. The 1947 act allowed the Northern Ireland government to become involved in activities that extended across and beyond its own frontiers.¹⁷

This had certain attractions to Dublin; a Department of External Affairs memo pointed out that such an act “would open up the prospect of our being able to make agreements with the Six County authorities direct without having to go through London”. Secretary of the department, Frederick Boland, possibly with de Valera’s reaction in mind, observed that this “may ultimately tend towards the unity of the country”.¹⁸ Whatever objections there might be to such dealings on grounds of principle, “they might lead to something useful in practice”.¹⁹ De Valera had other thoughts, and was worried that the bill might “lend to the Six County area the appearance of an international status which it does not enjoy at present”.²⁰ External Affairs disagreed, commenting that the Erne scheme was an instance of “administrative arrangements rather than an international agreement” because the act legislated for departments of the Northern Ireland government to make agreements and not the government itself.²¹ The potentially wide-ranging powers of the bill were felt to be further circumscribed as it only contemplated agreements within the island of Ireland.

While the 1947 act had been passing through parliament preliminary engineering work took place on the Erne. Speaking in a debate in the Northern Irish Senate on Electricity supply, Roland Nugent played down the political aspects of the Erne scheme; it was “a plain business-like transaction... good business for both of us”.²² There had, Nugent explained, “not been any consultation on a government level, and I do not think there ever will be”. Such rhetoric was essential for the political acceptance of the Erne scheme in Northern Ireland. But the co-operation with Dublin appeared again in the 1947 Command Paper on reform of the Northern Ireland electricity supply, which explicitly stated that the incoming Northern Ireland Joint Electricity Committee would “arrange with the Eire Electricity Supply Board for the purchase, sale, or exchange of supplies of energy should this prove desirable”.²³

During October 1947, Brooke used the opportunity of a question from Nationalist Party MP Cahir Healy to make an official statement on the Erne scheme. He turned Healy’s question round to say that Northern Ireland had magnanimously allowed the Southern authorities to undertake civil engineering works within Northern Irish territory to improve the ESB’s Erne project. Since the ESB would pay for the drainage plan, it was “a unique opportunity for laying the foundation of a scheme for the ame-

¹⁷ The bill would also cover cross-border bridge repair, railways, roads and rivers.

¹⁸ NAI Department of Foreign Affairs (hereafter DFA) 305/84, 16 April 1947.

¹⁹ NAI DFA 305/84, 25 June 1946.

²⁰ NAI DFA 305/84, 30 November 1946.

²¹ NAI DFA 305/84, minute by Cremin, 17 December 1947.

²² *Hansard NI (Senate)* 31, col. 201, 1 July 1947.

²³ *Electricity Development in Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 1947, Cmd. 250), p. 6.

lioration of Lough Erne flooding”.²⁴ Brooke was speaking directly to his constituents; the previous week the Lisnaskea branch of the Ulster Farmers Union had passed a resolution calling for details of the planned drainage scheme. Despite the many arguments in cabinet over the previous years, the Northern Irish government would now “do everything we can to expedite” the Erne scheme.²⁵

Brooke’s pronouncement on the Erne scheme was significant. His formal statement that Stormont was ready to co-operate with Dublin allowed Scott at the Ministry of Finance to deal openly with the ESB. Previously only the principle of co-operation had been agreed upon. Scott and Browne now set to work drafting an agreement between the ESB and the Northern Ireland Ministry of Finance. By November 1948, the heads of legislation were ready and drafting was taking place. Archive sources indicate that up to now there was no immediate constraint on the Erne scheme beyond bureaucratic and legislative timetables. But in December 1948 Browne was concerned that the “works in Northern Ireland near Belleek should be carried out in the immediate future”.²⁶ The operation of the Cliff power station was at stake, and Browne was adamant that “our supply position is such that we cannot afford to have any delays which can possibly be avoided”.

Despite the rise of anti-partitionism and Ireland’s leaving the Commonwealth, a delegation from Northern Ireland travelled to Dublin during March 1949 to meet a combined team from Industry and Commerce, Finance the Office of Public Works and the ESB to complete the final form of the Erne legislation. The Northern and Southern bills were to dovetail and the southern heads of agreement were compared to the draft Northern Irish bill. The bill would be simultaneously introduced as separate but identical legislation in the Dáil and Stormont. The next round of the drafting conference would be held in Belfast. The continuing tension in Anglo-Irish relations led Boland to think that there would be “obvious difficulties” in a North–South conference at official level. But he also saw the Erne project operating in a non-political environment and sought to play down the difficulties to his Minister, Sean MacBride, by telling him that “the Erne scheme must obviously go on. We should be only cutting off our noses to spite our faces if anything were done to delay or endanger it at this stage”.²⁷

At a meeting on 27 March the Northern Irish cabinet approved the joint agreement and legislation.²⁸ Maynard Sinclair circulated a very forceful and detailed memorandum on the Erne scheme. He invoked the authority of previous cabinet decisions approving co-operation, statements by Brooke on the scheme, and the positive impact of the drainage scheme for the Erne region. The only drawback was that the ESB would now have no surplus power to sell to Northern Ireland. Trying to head off

²⁴ *Hansard NI (Commons)* 31, col. 1791, 14 October 1947.

²⁵ *Hansard NI (Commons)* 31, col. 1792, 14 October 1947.

²⁶ NAI DTP FP 19/7, Browne – Price, 20 December 1948.

²⁷ NAI DFA 305/84, 19 May 1949.

²⁸ PRONI CAB/9A/37/19, minute of cabinet conclusions.

any opposition, Maynard Sinclair concluded that “failure to co-operate would mean that no effective drainage scheme could ever be devised for the Northern Ireland portion of the Erne”.²⁹ This point clinched the cabinet’s approval, but it would be interesting to know how much the impending passage by Westminster of the Ireland Act, which copperfastened Northern Ireland’s position in the United Kingdom, also influenced the decision by giving Stormont a feeling of greater security when dealing with Dublin.

The Dublin government passed the agreement between the ESB and the Northern Irish Ministry of Finance and the heads of legislation on 4 April and authorised the drafting of the bill and its introduction into the Dáil.³⁰ The emphasis of the bills would be different on each side of the border. In the Republic, the electricity aspects of the agreement, allowing the ESB to develop its hydroelectric programme, would be stressed; in Northern Ireland the drainage dimension would be the particular area of interest. The bills were simultaneously formally presented in the Dáil and Stormont on 2 May 1950, the text being published on 8 May in Dublin and Belfast. This synchronisation took a great deal of effort; so much so that Thomas McCrea, at Finance in Belfast, wrote to Shanagher that “we are becoming very regular correspondents on this subject - in fact, each morning when I arrive I look to see if there is a letter from you!”³¹ Shanagher later wrote to Woods that he would “certainly regret” the ending of their correspondence over the bill but, “there may be some other ground on which we will find a reason to correspond”.³²

The *Irish Times* published an editorial on the bill under the heading “sign of grace” and hoped that “further agreements may not be impossible”.³³ The article was in line with the larger contemporary European agenda, the plan for the European Coal and Steel Community just having been announced. The paper felt that Dublin and Belfast could exchange trade commissioners and think of a federal solution to the Irish question in the same manner as the Benelux countries. The paper concluded by hoping that the bill was a foundation upon which “a firm structure can be built” for future co-operation. Over the border, the *Belfast Telegraph* called the agreement “admirable” and felt it “should have fruitful consequences”.³⁴

The parallel second readings of the bill took place on the afternoon of 16 May 1950. In Dublin, Liam Cosgrave, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Industry and Commerce, outlined the benefits to the Erne scheme that the agreement with the Ministry of Finance in Belfast would provide. Without these works “the production of power would be somewhat intermittent and continuity of output could only be

²⁹ PRONI CAB/9A/37/19, memorandum 23 March 1950.

³⁰ NAI DT (Department of the Taoiseach) S13314, extract from cabinet minutes, 4 April 1950 (GC 5/166).

³¹ NAI DTP 11/3, 4 May 1950. .

³² *Ibid*, 6 May 1950.

³³ *Irish Times*, 10 May 1950.

³⁴ *Belfast Telegraph*, 17 May 1950.

obtained by the erection of an auxiliary steam plant”.³⁵ The speech was short and to the point; Cosgrave concluded by making clear that there was no drainage interest for the Republic but that joint control of the Erne sluices had to be put on a statutory basis. For the opposition, Sean Lemass welcomed the bill, and gave it Fianna Fáil’s support. The bill passed without problems.

In Belfast, Maynard Sinclair introduced the bill at about the same time as Cosgrave in Dublin. He stressed the action that would be taken to relieve flooding in the Erne area. The bill held out “a substantial measure of solution [to] this long-drawn-out and seemingly intractable problem”.³⁶ He presented Stormont with the same arguments he had used in cabinet—looking at the benefits, financial, civil engineering and otherwise, that would accrue to Northern Ireland through the Erne scheme. Speaking for the Nationalist Party, Cahir Healy thought he “could detect a new note in the right hon. Gentleman’s voice today, and a sort of joyous look as if he were getting some inspiration from across the border”.³⁷ As in Dublin, the second reading of the bill passed with ease. According to the *Northern Whig*, it was a “unique occasion” when a matter of joint concern was presented before the two parliaments in Ireland. It was, the paper continued, “a pity that the occasions could not be more frequent”.³⁸

By the end of June, the bill had passed in both jurisdictions. The ESB and the Ministry of Finance placed contracts for the work in Northern Ireland and on the border. On 4 September 1950, the joint agreement was finally signed. Work on the deepening and widening of the river Erne in November 1952. The second generating set at Cathleen’s Falls had come into operation in April 1952 and the final set at Cliff was operational by Christmas 1954.³⁹ The new controls and levels came into operation on 15 June 1956. By 1957 the work on the Erne had been completed. A Stormont cabinet memorandum from eight years later, in 1964, shows the impact of the scheme.⁴⁰ The lake water had been kept within the statutory levels and flash floods were more effectively dealt with. Land in the Upper Lough region was still prone to flooding. But during spring and autumn, the level was “below the statutory level and there was much benefit in this”. To the ESB, the two power stations of the Erne scheme provided substantial power to the national grid during the 1950s, assisting it to overcome problems of post-war supply forecast in 1943.

³⁵ *Dáil debates* 120, col. 35, 16 May 1950.

³⁶ *Hansard NI (Commons)* 34, col. 962, 16 May 1950.

³⁷ *Hansard NI (Commons)* 34, col. 967, 16 May 1950.

³⁸ *Northern Whig*, 17 May 1950.

³⁹ The Erne System had a combined generating capacity of 65 megawatts.

⁴⁰ PRONI CAB/9A/37/19, 23 September 1964.

CONCLUSION

The Erne scheme took 15 years to complete. The agreement and legislation alone took almost seven years. Hidden behind the major changes in Anglo-Irish relations of 1948-9 and the anti-partition movement, the Erne Drainage and Development Act marks a landmark in North-South relations. Yet it has become a forgotten episode in cross-border co-operation. Its significance is that it was non-political, a success and, unfortunately, a one off. The scheme provided an unobtrusive example of apolitical and mutually beneficial North-South co-operation. Partition and the border did not prevent the construction of the Erne station and its associated drainage works, thus North and South entered the realms of practical politics. Here was a template for future co-operation that took the border into account: Cabinet approval, agreement at official and public sector level, parallel legislation drafted on a co-operative basis and its simultaneous introduction into respective parliaments. Even amidst the raucous cries of the anti-partition campaign, Dublin and Belfast could work together for their mutual benefit because that benefit was tangible. The Erne scheme was an essential scheme, where both parties needed each other and where maximum benefit could not accrue to each party unless one co-operated fully with the other. What is significant is that both governments realised this and moved to co-operate where they could, particularly given the climate of the time, so easily refused. For its time, the Erne scheme was a model of effective cross-border co-operation.

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