

‘If there is no other suitable candidate’: Why Ireland was elected to the United Nations Security Council in 1961¹

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Introduction

Ireland has on three occasions served on the United Nations Security Council. The two most recent terms, 1981-2 and 2000-2 have attracted some academic interest.² In contrast, almost no research has been undertaken into the 1962 term. Writing in *Irish Studies in International Affairs* in 1996, former Secretary-General of the Department of Foreign Affairs and former Ambassador to the United Nations, Noel Dorr, described the 1962 term as ‘now almost forgotten.’³ This paper explains how the decision taken in December 1960 to embrace Security Council membership in 1962 arose.

Non-permanent membership of the Security Council 1946 - 1955

On the establishment of the United Nations, the membership of the Security Council was eleven, with six non-permanent members joining the five permanent members. Non-permanent members stood for election according to membership of regional geographic blocs. The distribution of non-permanent seats became a contested cold war issue. In 1946 the first session of the General Assembly came to what became known as the ‘Gentleman’s Agreement’ on the distribution of non-permanent seats. Under it the non-permanent seats were allocated to six regions: one to the Commonwealth, one to Western Europe, one to Eastern Europe, one to South America, one to the Middle East and one to Central America.

¹ I would like to thank Mr Noel Dorr, former Irish Ambassador to the United Nations and Secretary-General of the Department of Foreign Affairs for reading a draft of this paper, for his comments and most helpful criticisms. A longer version of this paper is to be published in Michael Kennedy and Deirdre McMahon (editors), *Obligations and Responsibilities: Ireland and the United Nations, 1955 – 2005 Essays marking fifty years of Ireland’s United Nations membership* (Dublin, forthcoming, 2005).

² For the 2000 to 2002 term see John Doyle, ‘International and domestic pressures on Irish foreign policy: an analysis of the UN Security Council term 2001-2’, Centre for International Studies, Dublin City University, working paper 5 of 2005, available at www.dcu.ie/~cis/2005_5.pdf (accessed 14 August 2005) and also his ‘Irish Diplomacy on the UN Security Council 2001-2’, in *Irish Studies in International Affairs*, vol. 15 (2004), pp 73-101 and for the 1981-82 term, see Ben Tonra ‘The internal dissenter (II): Ireland’, in Christopher Hill and Stelios Stavridis (eds.), *Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy – West European Reactions to the Falklands Conflict* (Oxford, 1996)..

³ Noel Dorr, ‘Ireland at the UN: 40 Years On’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs* vol. 7 (1996), pp. 41-62, p. 52.

There was no Asian seat, nor was there a seat for the African members of the United Nations. Until 1955 the ‘Gentleman’s Agreement’ ‘worked admirably.’⁴ By the time of Ireland’s admission to the United Nations, the election for the Eastern European seat had become ‘a source of controversy and deadlock.’⁵ A more significant source of controversy than problems over the Eastern European seat was that the ‘Gentleman’s Agreement’ could not take account of the increase in the membership of the United Nations which took place from 1955. To the new members from Africa and Asia, the geographical distribution of non-permanent seats looked far from equal.

Irish attitudes towards Security Council reform 1955 to 1960

On Ireland’s joining the United Nations in December 1955, External Affairs agreed that ‘some increase [in the size of the Security Council] is necessary in view of the greatly increased membership of the United Nations and the lack of representation for Asian countries.’⁶ In a memorandum on Security Council reform the Department argued that ‘our attitude to the question of the increase must be affected by the answer we give to the question “Do we wish at some time to serve on the Security Council?”’⁷ They continued, ‘whatever misgivings we may have about the answer it is obvious that if we are continuously passed over it will be a definite blow to our international standing.’ This analysis shows that there was no early pressure building up in Dublin to stand for election to the Security Council. Ireland’s United Nations policy remained firmly rooted in the Assembly with no aspirations for higher office, yet with a realisation that to be continually passed over in favour of the members of the Benelux and the Scandinavian groups for the Western European seat would be detrimental to Ireland’s international position.

Ireland was brought closer to the fray over the Western European seat in 1958 when Italy offered Dublin ‘reciprocal’ support if Ireland supported Italy in succeeding Sweden on the Security Council. In a revealing aside, the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs, Con Cremin, minuted that ‘I am not sure whether we will in fact be seeking membership of that body in the next two or three years whereas we are now looking for a seat on ECOSOC.’⁸ Cremin’s remarks show that Ireland, despite its strengthening record in the General Assembly did not at the time envisage running for Security Council membership. An

⁴ NAI DFA 417/128/2 part IA, ‘Memorandum: Gentleman’s Agreement’.

⁵ NAI DFA 417/230/1, ‘Slate for 16th Session of the General Assembly’.

⁶ *Ibid.*, ‘Memorandum: Gentleman’s Agreement’.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ NAI DFA PMUN 289, note by Cremin, 27 May 1958.

ECOSOC seat was the limit of Ireland's United Nations aspirations. At no time prior to December 1960 did Ireland envisage that it would serve on the Security Council.

Ireland supported an Assembly resolution on enlargement in December 1960 as well as an amendment on 'broader representation on existing.'⁹ Ireland did not support a further amendment put forward by the Afro-Asian bloc calling for the immediate redistribution of seats. When the entire resolution on the enlargement of the Council was put to a vote, Ireland abstained. The resolution was defeated by a narrow majority. This move incensed the Afro-Asian bloc. They were now determined 'to undermine the traditional arrangements by attempting to raid seats held by other groups.'¹⁰ This determination fed into the growing tensions between the old imperial states and newly independent states that had recently joined the United Nations. It provided the immediate context to the 1960 elections to the Security Council and created the scenario where Ireland was reluctantly forced to seek Security Council membership.

The Presidency of the 15th Session of the General Assembly

Ireland's desire for advancement in the United Nations was moving in directions other than the Security Council. Following his successful chairmanship of the Fourth Committee in 1958, the Committee which dealt with problems of decolonisation, a strong body of opinion developed favouring Irish Permanent Representative to the United Nations Frederick Boland running for the Presidency of the Assembly in 1960 when it was Europe's turn to hold the seat.

Boland had a personal reputation for impartiality and his term as chair of the Fourth Committee in 1958 had been an apprenticeship allowing him to seek higher office. As it was the calibre of the individual, rather than the standing of his country, that was supposed to be the chief factor when choosing a president, his chairing of the Fourth Committee suggested that Boland would be a strong independent candidate.

Ireland's increasingly non-aligned position in the Assembly since Frank Aiken had become minister in 1957 gave Boland support from the Afro-Asian bloc. Aiken, in New York for the General Assembly, cabled Dublin that he 'strongly recommend[ed] Governmental approval of candidature without delay.'¹¹ Lemass agreed 'subject to its being absolutely

⁹ NAI DFA PMUN 289, telegram, UNEIREANN to ESTERO, 6 Dec. 1960.

¹⁰ TNA DO 181/109, telegram no. 735, 14 Dec. 1960, Foreign Office to Lisbon, 14 Dec. 1960.

¹¹ NAI Department of the Taoiseach (hereafter DT) S13750C, UNEIREANN to ESTERO, 6 Nov. 1959.

assured that USA support would be announced immediately after the announcement.’¹² With Washington also so quick to offer Boland support, those seeking to damage his candidature could call his true independence into question. Impartial as he was as a diplomat, Boland was known to be ideologically strongly pro-Western. This dual position was the basis of much of Ireland’s success in the United Nations in the early 1960s.

Boland’s election campaign can in retrospect be seen as a proxy-cavass for later Ireland’s Security Council candidacy. Of course it was not seen to be so at the time. However, the manoeuvring, tabulating of possible votes, discussions and appeals gave Aiken and the Irish delegation important prior knowledge of their standing in the Assembly. It provided an excellent intelligence assessment of where Ireland stood in the opinions of the member states that not only elected the president of the Assembly, but also elected the non-permanent members of the Security Council.

Deadlock continues: The Security Council elections at the 15th Session of the General Assembly

For the fifteenth General Assembly, Dublin concentrated on winning the Presidency for Boland. External Affairs awaited the Security Council elections with interest. The value of Ireland’s voting for a Security Council candidate was calculated in terms of votes gained for Boland’s presidency. For example, Ireland preferred the UAR to fill the Arab seat, but reckoned that Jordan was more likely to vote for Boland as President.

Portugal and the Netherlands fought it out to succeed to the Western European seat to be vacated by Italy. Portugal was unlikely to appeal to the Afro-Asian bloc because of its record on the Fourth Committee of the Assembly. The Netherlands felt that it was entitled to stand in 1960, having withdrawn in 1958 to ensure Italy’s election. Lisbon promised that it would support Boland for the presidency if it got Ireland’s support for its Security Council candidature. External Affairs considered that Portugal was ‘not the most desirable candidate.’¹³

Boland reported to Dublin on 9 March that ‘difficulties have developed’ regarding the Western European seat.¹⁴ Portugal had begun canvassing for the Italian seat, despite ‘widespread feeling that the Portuguese decision to seek the seat was very injudicious.’¹⁵ It

¹² Ibid., minute by Moynihan, 7 Nov. 1959.

¹³ Ibid., Keating to Ronan, 8 Sept. 1960.

¹⁴ NAI DFA PMUN 289, Boland to Cremin, 9 Mar. 1960.

¹⁵ Ibid., Boland to Cremin, 9 Mar. 1960.

was ‘hoped and believed’ that Portugal would withdraw in favour of the Netherlands. Nonetheless, Lisbon continued with what Kennedy later called ‘its ill-starred candidature.’¹⁶

It was only after the Netherlands withdrew its candidature that Aiken finally decided that Ireland would support Portugal. While this decision was based on ‘general political factors’ and ‘despite the fact that the Netherlands has a better record in the United Nations’, Aiken was conscious that Ireland had ‘in the past been somewhat critical of Portugal’s attitude’ in relation to Mozambique and Angola and Aiken did not want ‘to create the impression of a fundamental lack of goodwill to Portugal’, a country which, Dublin noted, had not held any office in the United Nations.¹⁷ Dublin was concerned that Portugal would be a liability on the Security Council when questions such as apartheid were before the United Nations and ‘other African problems are erupting.’ But the Portuguese pushed their ‘self-nominated’ candidature strongly and through ‘emotional insistence’ became the choice of the Western European group.¹⁸

By the opening of the General Assembly it was uncertain whether an Indian sponsored Afro-Asian move would succeed to scupper Portuguese chances of election, but Dublin was warned that if it did, the term would be split between Portugal and an Afro-Asian state, with Portugal serving the second year. Before the elections to the Security Council took place the election of the President of the General Assembly was held.

‘The Greatest Diplomatic Gathering the World has ever seen’:¹⁹ the fifteenth session of the General Assembly

Ireland’s profile in the United Nations increased considerably when Boland was elected President of the Assembly on 20 September. Irish diplomats had under-estimated his support: Boland received forty-six votes against Noesk’s twenty-five and Thors’s nine. Lemass cabled Boland that he was ‘very glad indeed to hear of your election[,] warmest congratulations.’²⁰ The Taoiseach later added that Boland’s election was a cause of justifiable pride for the Irish people. It was an indication of Ireland’s status among the nations and a tribute to the independent part that we had taken in United Nations affairs.²¹

The attendance of Khrushchev and Eisenhower gave the Assembly, which was attended by fourteen other heads of state, an atmosphere filled with nervous energy. In

¹⁶ NAI DFA 417/233/1, Kennedy to Cremin, 19 June 1962.

¹⁷ Ibid., Cremin to Biggar (confidential), 21 May 1960.

¹⁸ TNA DO 181/109, telegram no. 426, Dean to Foreign Office, 22 Dec. 1960.

¹⁹ UCDA P104/6339, ‘F. Boland’s speech on election as President, 1960’.

²⁰ NAI DT S13750C, telegram Lemass to Boland, 21 Sept. 1960.

²¹ Ibid., transcript of remarks from *Irish Press*, 22 Sept. 1960.

Boland's own words there was 'a general air of drama and excitement in the Assembly.'²² Boland was now the primary figure in the hierarchy of the Assembly and in that context, senior even to Secretary-General Hammarskjöld.

As President, Boland 'encountered more problems of procedure, faced more temperamental outbursts and received more criticism than most Assembly Presidents have run into in a year.'²³ He became one of Khrushchev's targets as the Russian launched an attack on the integrity of the United Nations. In retrospect, Boland could only suppose that this had been 'for reasons of his own, of which there is no generally accepted explanation.'²⁴

The climax of this 'unheard-of tension and disorder' came on 13 October with four hours of squabbles on the floor of the Assembly. During the debate on colonial freedom, the Romanian Minister for Foreign Affairs, waving his fist in the air, accused Boland of being unfair to the Soviet Bloc, with the riposte 'I can only hope that the Irish people enjoy the same measure of freedom as the Romanians.'²⁵ This was the moment when, as president, Boland had to act. He felt that 'the very structure of the United Nations seemed to be tottering on the brink of disintegration.'²⁶ In attempting to silence the Romanian for references to the chair and unparliamentary behaviour during a general din in the Assembly Boland, his face flushed with righteous indignation, broke his President's gavel as 'the obviously angry Irishman' ended the session abruptly.²⁷ It was, Aiken wrote to Dublin, the culmination of 'an extraordinary few weeks.'²⁸ It was an unprecedented action, but in taking it Boland received a standing ovation from the great majority of those present. Boland had shown his mettle and his diplomatic skills to the states of the world and confirmed to them that he was a worthy president.

By early December 1960 Irish diplomats had a prominent position in the Assembly. Boland was automatically identified with Ireland and reflected credit on the country; he was openly being talked of as a possible successor to Hammarskjöld as Secretary-General. Aiken addressed the first committee on the non-dissemination of nuclear weapons. He then made a high profile speech on decolonisation to a plenary session of the Assembly, guaranteed to increase Ireland's image among the Afro-Asian states as a supporter of the principle of freedom for all nations.

²² Ibid., Boland to Lemass, 3 Nov. 1960.

²³ NAI DFA 417/215, transcript of Associated Press report by Tom Hoge 'Testing time for Boland. Firm and fair hand on United Nations debates' (undated).

²⁴ NAI DT S13750C, Boland to Lemass, 3 Nov. 1960.

²⁵ NAI DFA 417/215, transcript of Reuters report 'Communist uproar cuts short United Nations session.'

²⁶ NAI DT S13750C, Boland to Lemass, 3 Nov. 1960.

²⁷ NAI DFA 417/215, transcript of UPI report, no title, no date.

²⁸ NAI DFA 313/36/3, Aiken to Cremin, 13 Oct. 1960.

The ‘chief compromiser’: Ireland decides to put its name forward²⁹

Meanwhile, the crisis over the Security Council continued. The Afro-Asian group were making a determined move to oppose Portugal. The Western European group agreed to continue to support Portugal. Privately the Foreign Office was discussing ‘the danger of losing control of these elections’, if neither Portugal nor the Netherlands were elected. They began to realise that ‘we might in the last resort even have to look outside NATO for a quick solution on this occasion.’³⁰ Dublin had for some time considered it ‘unlikely’ that Portugal would be elected.³¹

The Security Council elections went ahead on 9 December.³² Voting was suspended after seven ballots as Portugal failed to get elected. What had been a campaign to deny the seat to Portugal had become one to gain it for the Afro-Asian bloc. Portugal’s candidature was dead, the Afro-Asians would agree only to a split term between and African state and a western European candidate other than Portugal.

By 14 December it was decision time. The British made ‘urgent efforts to persuade an alternative European candidate to stand.’³³ In order of preference they proposed Denmark, Ireland or Iceland. Britain was desperately trying to retain the Western European seat for Western Europe as, if it were lost, London could ‘say good-bye to our chances of expecting to get 7 affirmative votes on any controversial issue in the Security Council.’³⁴

On 14 December British Ambassador to the United Nations, Sir Patrick Dean ‘privately put the proposition’ to Boland that Ireland stand. Boland in turn passed it on to Aiken, who was still in New York and who was, it was reported, ‘interested.’³⁵ It was a false alarm. The following day Aiken cabled Dublin that ‘Norway has agreed to step into the breach. We need not bother further.’³⁶ Ireland could step back; the deadlock had been resolved.

But all changed on 16 December when Norway withdrew her candidature. They would not stand if there were another candidate in the running. Aiken telephoned Cremin just after midnight on 17 December that he was ‘trying to find some other solution but that ultimately

²⁹ *Irish Press*, 10 Jan. 1961.

³⁰ TNA DO 181/109, Uffen to Warburton, 25 Oct. 1960.

³¹ NAI DFA 417/215/2, Ronan to Cremin, 12 Oct. 1960.

³² Chile and the UAR elected for two years and Turkey elected for one year.

³³ *Ibid.*, telegram no. 1625, UKMUN to Foreign Office, 14 Dec. 1960.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Campbell to Tahourdin, 22 December 1961.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ NAI DFA PMUN 289, UNEIREANN to ESTERO, 15 Dec. 1960.

we may have no alternative but to agree' to run.³⁷ Cremin then informed Aiken that Lemass felt that if in Aiken's view 'it was necessary for us to accept, the Government would have no objection.'³⁸ There was great reluctance on Aiken's part to allow Ireland's name to go forward. Lemass left the final decision with his foreign minister, giving him the full support of the Cabinet and leaving Aiken in no doubt what his own views were.³⁹ Lemass 'had requested the Minister for External Affairs ... to avoid accepting Irish membership, if at all possible.'⁴⁰ Lemass was as reluctant as Aiken to put Ireland forward, yet he realised that in certain circumstances Ireland might have no alternative. Later on 17 December Cremin cabled Aiken with some revealing news: 'British have now put it to us strongly that we should accept Security Council seat in event of Norway feeling unable to do so.'⁴¹ This further British *démarche* is remarkable. Lemass had up to now instructed Aiken that he 'might accept if a deadlock arose which could not otherwise get resolved.'⁴² Cremin, developing his previous discussion with Aiken, continued that 'in the circumstances [the] Taoiseach considers [that] we should be more [than] ready to accept if [there is] no suitable alternative. Have so informed British.'⁴³ Under British pressure Lemass had moved from avoiding membership 'if at all possible', to being 'ready to accept' if no alternative candidate emerged.

The British action shows a remarkable closeness in Anglo-Irish relations less than two years into Lemass' seven years as Taoiseach and an unusual degree of sidelining of Aiken over United Nations policy. Following a telegram to New York, Aiken, with Lemass' say so, allowed Ireland's name to be put forward as a candidate, in order to prevent the possibility 'that the Council would not be able to function because it did not have its full complement of members.'⁴⁴

Portugal withdrew its candidature. It would not agree to the western European seat being divided between two rivals. Ireland had come second when the General Assembly held an unrestricted poll in which members could vote for countries other than Liberia and Portugal. Further inconclusive ballots followed. In the last such ballot Ireland and Liberia tied with forty-five votes each. Boland, as President, now suggested deferring the balloting

³⁷ NAI DT S16137G, note by Cremin, 17 Dec. 1960.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ That said, the Cabinet had not even been informed of these developments as the note of an Cabinet discussion on 20 December of which no formal minute was taken reveals that 20 December was the first occasion on which Lemass informed the Cabinet of the 'difficulties which had arisen in the selection of a member of the Security Council.' (NAI DT S16971A, 'pink slip' note by Moynihan of unminuted discussion, 20 Dec. 1960.)

⁴⁰ NAI DT S16971A, 'pink slip' note by Moynihan of unminuted discussion, 20 Dec. 1960.

⁴¹ NAI DFA PMUN 289, ESTERO to UNEIREANN, 17 Dec. 1960.

⁴² NAI DT S16971A, 'pink slip' note by Moynihan of unminuted discussion, 20 Dec. 1960.

⁴³ NAI DFA PMUN 289, ESTERO to UNEIREANN, 17 Dec. 1960.

⁴⁴ *Cork Examiner*, 21 Dec. 1960.

‘in the hope that through contacts between the parties concerned, we can approach this matter with a better hope of success later in the evening.’⁴⁵ A fifteen-minute adjournment was called and consultations took place between the delegations. When the Assembly resumed ‘after a remarkably complex series of negotiations’, Boland announced that an informal agreement had been reached whereby Liberia would be the only candidate for election, and if they were elected would serve through 1961, at the end of the year withdrawing in favour of Ireland.⁴⁶

Subsequently, on the fourteenth ballot Liberia was elected, receiving seventy-six votes out of the eighty-five cast. This gave the Western European seat ‘an African association.’⁴⁷ It was a turning point in the history of the Security Council. It was a pointed victory for the Afro-Asian grouping over the Portuguese. Not all Western European group members were pleased with the outcome; Italy and Spain felt that Ireland had been ‘unjustly rewarded for disloyalty to the group candidate.’⁴⁸ Writing in January 1961, Desmond Fisher of the *Irish Press* recounted how an un-named African foreign minister told him that 1960 “‘was to have been Africa’s year at the United Nations instead it has turned out to be Ireland’s year.” He laughed when I suggested “as a compromise” that we call it “Afro-Irish year”.’⁴⁹ And so it had been. In addition to being almost certain to being elected to the Security Council in 1961, Ireland, through Boland had held the Presidency of the General Assembly and in the last week of December 1960 it was announced that the Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces, Major-General Seán MacEoin, would take over command of ONUC, the United Nations peacekeeping force in the Congo. As another delegate told Fisher, ‘It looks as if Ireland is turning this place into a one-nation United Nations.’

Conclusion

Ultimately, the December 1960 move was a surprise. The background from 1955 to 1960 shows that Ireland did not actively seek Security Council membership on any occasion up to 1960, a position in marked contrast to subsequent terms where detailed canvasses were carried out. However the Minister for External Affairs and his department were well aware of the problems facing the Security Council. Aiken sought a Security Council that, despite problems over the veto, operated, underlying the importance to him of a United Nations that though an imperfect organisation, at least functioned. It was certainly within the ideological

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ TNA DO 181/109, telegram no. 1711, UKMUN to Foreign Office, 20 Dec. 1960.

⁴⁷ NAI DFA 417/233/1, Kennedy to Cremin, 19 June 1962.

⁴⁸ TNA DO 181/109, telegram no. 426, Dean to Foreign Office, 22 Dec. 1960.

⁴⁹ *Irish Press*, 10 Jan. 1961.

parameters of Irish United Nations policy to consider Security Council membership, but the sources suggest that little consideration had in fact been given to such a move.

That Ireland should desire to break the electoral deadlock in December 1960 was one consideration, that she should be judged able to fill the gap by the other members of the General Assembly was another. Ireland's pro-western outlook, her quasi-non-alignment and anti-colonial stance left her perfectly situated compared to other candidates who would not share a term with Liberia or were not acceptable to the Afro-Asian bloc. Ireland's flexible United Nations policy that looked to the west and the developing world together with Aiken's and Boland's combined personal standing, crossed the many divisions in the 1960 General Assembly. The presidency and Ireland's emergence as a compromise candidate are inextricably linked.

It would be tempting to argue that Security Council membership was the crowning moment of 1960, Ireland's United Nations *annus mirabilis*, but ultimately this would be incorrect. If Portugal had not persisted in its desire to contest the Netherlands for the seat vacated by Italy and if Liberia, following its own Afro-Asian agenda, had not also stood for the seat, the situation that allowed Ireland to step in as a compromise candidate would not have arisen. Ireland would not otherwise easily have emerged as an agreed Western Group candidate given the powerful forces at play within the group and Ireland's own non-membership of NATO. Ireland's nomination could only emerge by the acclamation of the Assembly in a time of crisis. Ireland's candidature emerged because of her active policy in the Assembly from 1958 to 1960, but it did not emerge as a part of that policy.

