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Confidential

2 March, 1989

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Assistant Secretary

A meeting with Peter Robinson

Mr. Farrell and I attended a meeting organised today by the Quaker Peace and Service group in London as part of its continuing series of lectures on Northern Ireland. Peter Robinson, MP, was the guest speaker. The meeting, which was governed by Chatham House rules of confidentiality, drew an attendance of about twenty, mainly foreign diplomats and Foreign Office officials. No journalists were present.

In the course of his presentation, and in the subsequent question and answer session, Robinson made a number of points of interest which are worth recording:

Taoiseach's Ard-Fheis speech

- Prefacing his remarks with the comment that statements by the Taoiseach are viewed by Unionists with deep suspicion (just as statements by Unionist leaders are greeted with suspicion in the South), Robinson said that he found one section of the speech "worthwhile". That was the section in which the Taoiseach indicated that the Anglo-Irish Agreement must stand "until such time as something better or more acceptable can be negotiated and agreed to take its place". The admission that there could be an alternative to the Agreement has not so far been made by the British Government. Robinson was encouraged that the Taoiseach has at least recognised this possibility.
- However, other elements of the speech (which he did not specify) were "less positive" and conditioned, perhaps, by the context in which the Taoiseach made the speech.

Mo 18

This is your interview.

SEEN BY
TAOISEACH

Taoiseach

To see file

5/8/3

[Signature]

cc PST; ASO4
Mr. Nulty; ASO; Ted
Mr. Harteaux / Mr. Tamm
(2) Connolly AS1

FOR

Mr. Harteaux
9-3-89

[Signature]

9/3

- Noting the public response of Unionist politicians to the speech, Robinson observed that, in the run-up to elections in May and June, it is inevitable that politicians will "bang drums rather than play violins".

Duisburg

- Robinson reiterated the Unionist proposal made at Duisburg and contained in the document subsequently handed to John Hume.
- Following the Duisburg talks, he claimed, he had surprisingly little difficulty in persuading Paisley and Molyneaux to agree to the position which had been enunciated there. When he handed the Unionist document to Hume, the latter's immediate response was: "I've no problem with any of that - let me take it back to my colleagues and I'll try to bring them along with it". The eventual SDLP response, however, was to provide an entirely different proposal. In handing over the SDLP document, Hume made clear to Robinson privately that it was not intended as a rejection of the Unionist paper, that he did not wish to close any doors, that he was sincerely committed to dialogue and that he wished to proceed in a manner which would not prejudice the position of any of the parties.
- Asked by a member of the audience to account for the apparent shift in the SDLP's position (from Hume's initially positive reaction to the SDLP counter-proposal), Robinson replied: "I'll give it to you in two words - Seamus Mallon".
- He went on to remark, with some emphasis, that Hume has acted in complete good faith throughout the Duisburg process. While the disclosure of the talks has damaged the relationships between some politicians in Northern Ireland, the relationship between Hume and the Unionists has, if anything, been strengthened by the episode. "We could each have made life difficult for the other but we did not".
- Robinson was disturbed not by the fact that the talks were disclosed but by the grossly exaggerated way in which the BBC chose to do so. As he put it to a BBC journalist: "Duisburg didn't fail - the BBC wrecked it". He does not know for sure who leaked the story but he believes that it was neither the Unionists nor the SDLP (who had nothing to gain from it). He agrees very considerably with Hume's analysis that, as disclosure was helpful only to Alliance, the latter were probably responsible. Confidence in the Alliance Party has been undermined and Robinson hinted that the Unionists and the SDLP will be very careful about involving Alliance in any future talks.
- Robinson reiterated a number of times that the leak has caused no break in the relationship between the Unionists and the SDLP. Whatever they may say about each other in the coming election campaigns, there is a private understanding that, while it will be difficult to "mend the fences pulled down by the BBC", a constructive basis exists nevertheless for fresh talks once the May and June elections are out of the way.

- The publicity stirred up over Duisburg unfortunately forced Northern Ireland politicians back into their "fixed positions". The best thing which the British and Irish Governments can do in the present situation is to say and do nothing which would cause the politicians to retreat into these fixed positions. Major statements requiring reactions from the Northern Ireland politicians are, therefore, unhelpful at the present time. (It subsequently became clear that Robinson was referring here to the efforts recently initiated by Mawhinney, at King's instigation, to evaluate the prospects for political movement).

Security situation

- In the course of rehearsing the standard Unionist criticism that the Agreement has failed to reduce the level of violence, Robinson admitted frankly that there has been an increase in the incidence of Protestant violence, including violence "of the most unseemly kind", and he condemned, in particular, recent sectarian killings in North Belfast.

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As a postscript, it is worth mentioning that the meeting concluded with an announcement that the next speaker in this series will be Oliver Miles ("of the Northern Ireland Office"), who will address the group on 14 April.

Yours sincerely

David Donoghue

David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer