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SECRET

Prospects for Political Progress

Meeting between Minister Collins and Mr. Brooke

London 11 June 1990

1. The Irish delegation consisted of Minister Collins, Secretary Dorr, Ambassador O' Rourke, Mr. Gallagher, Mr. O' Donovan and Ms. Anderson. The Secretary of State was accompanied by Mr. Burns, Ambassador Fenn, Mr. Alston and Mr. Thomas. The meeting, including the adjournment and tete-a-tete, lasted almost four hours.

Public comments by Mr. Brooke

2. At the outset, Mr. Brooke referred to his comments the previous week, under questioning from journalists, about the non-involvement of the Irish government in the internal Northern talks. He expressed appreciation for the restraint shown by the Government, and also by John Hume, in their responses; with hindsight, Mr. Brooke said, it would arguably have been better if his answer had been more evasive and he apologised if his comments had created a problem. Minister Collins said that the Taoiseach had been put under considerable pressure to respond to the remarks; the matter is likely to arise again in the Dáil this week but "we recognise the delicacy of the issue and will try to work our way gently through it".

Opening Statements

3. In his opening presentation, Minister Collins stressed the importance of getting the fundamentals right; we are in for a long haul and it is essential that the proper structures and format be established at the outset. The three sets of talks form an "integral entity"; any partial approach would be disastrous - not least because of the opportunity it

would provide the IRA to exploit the situation. On the other hand, talks that did address the fundamentals could encourage the present tentative moves towards dialogue within the IRA.

4. The Minister referred to the serious slippage since 19th April; he had reported to the Taoiseach and the Government on the basis of the 19 April text - that document was "practically our bottom line, not our opening bid". It was essential to bridge the gap between the 19 April text and the position as presented to us by Mr. Brooke on 28 May: the problems lay in three areas

- the Secretariat: we had a particular problem with the reference to "normal role" in the British text; in the light of his discussion with the SDLP, the Minister was certain that they also would have a similar problem. We had a strong preference for our own language (see Annex 1 for texts).
- the Liaison Group: agreement on the Liaison Group had helped to break the deadlock on 19 April; since all parties accepted the interlinking - "latticing" - of talks, surely the Unionists could not object to a common team of officials covering all three sets of talks; if the problem was the proposed Secretariat involvement, we could get around this. The Liaison Group was the vehicle for our input to the internal talks - this was very sensitive politically and extremely important to Northern nationalists as well as in the South.
- North/South talks: the clear wisdom of Ministers on 19 April had been that the various talks must be in unison - at that stage we were talking of a delay of a couple of days before the start of North/South talks. By contrast, on 28 May, Brooke had sketched out a scenario

which brought us to week six of the gap and "we weren't even at the starting gate". It was essential that there be precision and clarity on the timing of the North/South talks - this is a major problem for us.

5. In a responding statement, Mr. Brooke referred again (picking up his theme from 28 May) to the need for avoidance of a zero-sum game. "The heart of it, assuming we wish to continue to make progress, is to find something that will work". This means, of course, not just addressing Unionist preconditions but devising something which represents "a good deal" from everyone's viewpoint. Minister Collins said that, from an SDLP viewpoint, talks centred mainly on devolution, or on devolution in isolation, simply would not work - that formula had been tried and failed twice before. Mr. Brooke asked what alternative, workable, propositions the SDLP had to offer; Minister Collins said that the SDLP could speak for themselves but it was clear that they wanted the three sets of talks to take place at the same time.

Timing of North/South talks

6. A lengthy discussion followed on the timing of North/South talks. Mr. Brooke emphasised that there was no way the talks process could conclude without having addressed all three relationships; however, while he totally understood our problem, he was simply unable to predict the speed with which the North/South dimension would be reached. The Unionists feel that the moment to move on to North/South talks is when internal issues "are sufficiently talked through so that every one knows where they are". When talks begun, there will inevitably be a tension between the SDLP desire to move quickly towards North/South talks and the Unionist desire to explore internal relationships very fully before widening the discussion; he retained confidence, however, that "this would be a manageable process". Indeed, the talks might well get to a stage very early on where it would be clear to all involved that

further progress was not possible without the opening of North/South talks.

7. Minister Collins said that, as of now, all of the Northern parties accept that the three sets of relationships must be addressed during the gap. If this is the case, surely the logical approach is to map out a framework and timetable to cover the whole of the gap period - in other words, to establish a structure and formalise it rather than allowing things to wander. The Secretary of State should go back to the Unionists and suggest such an approach to them.
8. Mr. Brooke said that, insofar as progress has been made to date, it has been through not setting deadlines. Minister Collins asked if the Secretary of State was saying, in effect, that as of now he had no idea when North/South talks would begin. Mr. Brooke confirmed that this was the case but said he thought they would be likely to start early on, particularly if the SDLP insisted on this (although, he added, a deadlock created by SDLP insistence might not be the best way forward). Mr. Gallagher said this seemed an unduly negative approach: rather than hoping to unblock a deadlock, surely it was preferable to adopt a positive approach at the outset - give everyone an agenda and timeframe and presume they would accept it.
9. Mr. Burns said that all three Northern parties have their own reasons for wishing to address the North/South dimension; however, forecasting when they would be ready to do so was "like forecasting when the No. 11 bus was coming". It would put Mr. Brooke in an impossible position if he were expected to provide such a timetable. Minister Collins said the point was that we had such a timetable on 19 April. Mr. Dorr said we were not asking for a forecast, but for the Secretary of State to agree with the Northern parties a mechanism or date for the beginning of North/South talks. The argument could surely be made to Unionists that it would

be unreasonable to expect Dublin to go forward without such a date or mechanism.

10. Mr. Brooke said he had no problem in sitting down with the Northern Ireland parties to map out the agenda after the gap had started; however to seek to do so in advance would damage the chances of getting the process underway.

British Proposals

11. Mr. Brooke said that, in an effort to meet our concerns, he would be prepared to include in his proposed public statement (setting out the framework for talks) a commitment to meet Minister Collins on a particular date - around the middle of the gap - so as to describe progress to date and to indicate "what seemed to me a likely moment when the agenda would shift to you". Minister Collins said that presumably such a meeting would take place in any event; Mr. Brooke agreed but said there was value in having a date built into the process - "an overt statement made in advance".
12. Mr. Brooke then passed around - see Annex 2 - a draft text which he might use in a public statement (the first paragraph as discussed at the 28 May meeting and a second paragraph apparently intended to reassure us further on the timeframe). Minister Collins, on reading the draft, said that the positions were very far apart; the situation as set out in this text was unrecognisably different from what had been agreed on 19 April. He felt as if he were "in a swimming pool trying to rescue someone whose hand was slipping away". It would be impossible to get to first base with this statement - the SDLP would have the same problems as the Irish government.
13. Mr. Brooke said that John Hume maintained that the SDLP was not imposing any preconditions for talks; however, it is a form of precondition if the SDLP will agree to engage in

internal talks only if there are simultaneous talks with Dublin. Mr. Dorr said it puts the SDLP in a false position if there cannot be agreement at the outset on a mechanism which will give Dublin a role; it is simply too weak to say that perhaps the talks will throw this up.

14. Mr. Burns suggested that the text could be made more attractive to us by the insertion of a commitment - along the lines earlier sketched out by the Secretary of State - that Mr. Brooke would meet Minister Collins on a fixed date. Minister Collins responded that he was "so far off baseline" that any such gestures would be inadequate. Ambassador Fenn then sought to suggest language which the Minister might use in presenting the package in the Dáil (no mechanistic certainty but a "confident hope and expectation" that the internal talks would "ineluctably" lead to North/South talks).
15. Mr. Dorr asked if - particularly in view of what Paisley is pointedly not saying - the British could be so sure that the Unionists would balk at our requirement for precision in the timetable. Mr. Brooke said he could say with certainty that, if he tried to impose a timetable in advance, he would be unable to deliver it. Mr. Gallagher said that Molyneux has for years been talking about the totality of relationships; surely the logic of this was that Unionists should be prepared to agree a timeframe for the three sets of talks.
16. Mr. Brooke said that if John Hume were to go public on his insistence on the early opening of North/South talks, it might be easier to address the issue. Mr. Gallagher responded that it would be preferable for Hume not to go public because Unionists would then be obliged to take a public position also; handled with a light touch, the Unionists might well agree to a timeframe. Minister Collins said that - in an effort to ease the pressure points for

Unionists - we could agree to the East/West talks starting a day or so in advance of the North/South talks.

17. Summarising his position, Minister Collins said that any fudge on timetabling would be "blown away" in the Dáil. As far as the Government were concerned, he was still working on the 19 April text; while he could show some flexibility on timing, he had to be able to say with certainty that the North/South talks would begin at a particular time. Mr. Dorr suggested an insertion in the Secretary of State's proposed text to the effect that North/South talks would "in any case" begin at a particular time. Mr. Brooke said he would be uneasy with this since he would immediately be subject to questioning as to what the North/South talks would be discussing.
18. Restating his own position, Mr. Brooke said that, once the political parties were sitting around a table, he could envisage a way in which "we could get to timetabling"; however he did not want to agree a timetable in advance - he needed the "thumbprints" of the parties on any such discussion or agreement.

Adjournment

18. The meeting then adjourned for about an hour, much of which was taken up by a tete-a-tete between the Minister and the Secretary of State.

Outcome

19. At the conclusion of the tete-a-tete, Mr. Brooke briefed the meeting on the understanding reached between Minister Collins and himself. He said that he would meet with the SDLP "reasonably promptly" and his officials will meet with the Unionists who are currently preparing papers. Assuming that, when Brooke meets the SDLP, there is "a genuine problem in relation to the timetable", British officials will explain this to the Unionists - indicating that this is

a "perfectly understandable" position on the part of the SDLP - and try to resolve the matter at official level. If it proves impossible to resolve the issue at this level, Brooke will become involved himself. Handled that way, he felt, the issue would be arising organically within the process (this would be preferable to returning to Unionists immediately after his meeting with Minister Collins and indicating that there is a problem). Mr. Brooke reiterated that, in their discussions with Unionists, British officials would represent the SDLP position as "perfectly reasonable" and the issue would be played in a low-key manner in the first instance.

20. As to timetable, it was agreed that Minister Collins and Mr. Brooke might meet again at the end of June (after the European Council and before the Mandela visit). Mr. Brooke mentioned that there is an opportunity for a Parliamentary statement in the House of Commons in the first week of July when the Emergency legislation comes up for renewal; "if we are extremely fortunate", he might be in a position to avail of that opportunity to make a major statement on the prospects for political progress.
21. It was also agreed that the next Conference would be held in the second or third week of July (the 17th July was pencilled into diaries), with the following Conference probably taking place in the first week of September.

A.A.

A. Anderson
13 June 1990

c.c. P.S.M., Mr. Nally, P.S.S., Mr. Gallagher, Mr. Mathews,
Mr. Brosnan, Ambassador London, Joint Secretary,
Mr. Collins.*

Secretariat

British Text

"As the Conference will not be meeting between x and y, the Secretariat at Maryfield will accordingly not be required to discharge its normal role of servicing Conference meetings provided for in Article 3 of the Agreement."

Our Amendment

"As the Conference will not be meeting between x and y, it will not be necessary for the Secretariat established under Article 3 of the Agreement to service meetings of the Conference during that period."

TEXT FOR INCLUSION IN A STATEMENT BY MR BROOKE

"It is because the Northern Ireland parties all look, as I do, to address each of the three relationships that the talks I have described will necessarily involve discussions between the Northern Ireland parties, discussions involving the Northern Ireland parties and the Government of the Republic of Ireland: and discussions between the two Governments. These discussions may not necessarily start at the same time. But if real progress is to be made, it will be necessary to get all three sets of discussions under way at an early date and if an agreement satisfactory to all is to be reached on the three relationships, then discussions will need to proceed in parallel, and to conclude simultaneously".

"The British Government will maintain contact with the Irish Government from the outset of the process on all matters of concern to them. The participants in the talks on future political arrangements in Northern Ireland will be the British Government and the Northern Ireland political parties. Talks on future relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic, in which the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland political parties will participate, will begin as soon as sufficient progress has been made in the internal talks to make this worthwhile. It would not be right to try to force these talks into some straitjacket of timing. It is important to recognise that they are an organic process. But, taking account of that, and given the parties' constructive approach, I am confident that this point will be reached quickly. And the two Governments will be in constant touch about any implications for the Agreement proposed arrangements may have or about suggestions for an alternative to the Agreement".