



An Chartlann Náisiúnta **National Archives**

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Teaghaill.

You may wish to

see Secretary of State Brooke will wish to discuss prospects with Minister Collins in

Meeting on Northern Ireland between British and Irish

Officials, Iveagh House, 22 January 1990

Some detail.

Summary of British Briefing

- Political progress is now possible (rather than probable).
- Unionist preconditions for entering talks have eased considerably.
- A gap of up to three months between two meetings of the Conference would probably be acceptable to Unionists, in place of suspension of the Conference.
- If talks get underway, the British (under the guise of staffing pressure) would (in large part) redeploy their Head of the Secretariat to service the talks.
- Paisley is more flexible about talks than Molyneaux; however, the NIO believe that internal party pressure is likely to move the OUP leader.
- As talks get underway, the Dublin dimension would become clear and Dublin would have to be involved. (The British have clearly not as yet decided their own thinking on the format of such talks; under pressure, they could envisage our being involved from the beginning. In terms of substance, they seem to have no preconceived ideas about where talks might lead).
- It was important to take one step at a time, and the Co-Chairmen of the Conference could discuss together how to move forward at the next meeting on the 31st January.

Attendance

1. The British delegation was led by Mr. Ian Burns, who was accompanied by Mr. Quentin Thomas from the NIO in London and Ambassador Fenn. The Irish delegation consisted of Secretaries Nally and Dorr and Mr. D. Gallagher.

Background

2. Burns opened the meeting by saying that he was briefing us on the direct instructions of the Secretary of State. (We would also be briefed in the Secretariat). Mr. Brooke, as we would have gathered from his Bangor speech, now saw some prospect of political development in Northern Ireland. Because of the implications for the Irish Government, the Secretary of State would wish to exchange views with Mr. Collins at the next Conference, possibly at the tête-à-tête.
3. An additional reason why they should explain their thinking to us was that the Taoiseach's recent remarks had underscored how matters might be advanced in a practical way; the thinking of the two Governments on achieving political progress seemed in fact to be converging at this stage.
4. Burns underlined that he saw the conversation as being strictly confidential, and in particular he did not wish their thinking to be conveyed to the parties in the North.

Reasons for (cautious) optimism

5. Burns (who did almost all the talking on the British side) said the prospects for development were now a "little warmer". This was not just the NIO view. John Hume, whom the Secretary of State had met last Friday, believed that

the "level of realism in the North was higher" than he had ever known it to be. Hume added that any hesitation about entering into dialogue was confined to the Unionists.

6. Burns went on to say that the most significant Unionist precondition - renegotiation of the Agreement - had now "melted" and was no longer on the agenda. Unionists, since a meeting with Tom King in May 1988, were increasingly prepared to come to talks without preconditions. He added that, while the Taoiseach had said nothing new at the weekend, Nicholson had chosen to interpret his remarks as novel and constructive. (Burns seemed to be saying here that, while in the past Unionists had insisted that the Agreement should be set aside before talks, they were now prepared to come to talks with the Agreement in place, if their other conditions received a response).
7. Burns added that what was particularly encouraging now was that the Unionists had "lowered their sights" on the other two preconditions for talks, suspension of the Conference and Secretariat. They now saw value in having inter-party talks and, accordingly, were concerned less with the preconditions for talks and more on their possible substance. They were now focussing more on the way forward rather than on the obstacles to be overcome. But they were still nervous, and that was why they were keeping their preconditions for talks on the table.

Use of Gap between Conferences

8. The Unionist response to the Minister's reference to gaps after the last Conference (his comment that if people wished to use the period between it and the next Conference to talk, this was perfectly acceptable to him) showed that the Unionist precondition of suspension was now achievable through using a gap between Conferences. Burns defined a

gap as the period (up to three months) between two pre-set Conference dates, which would be designed to allow inter-party talks to take place. He emphasised that it should not be allowed to develop into something beyond this, as otherwise it could be seen as de facto suspension. British Ministers would not wish to see a dilution of the Agreement; their position was close to that of the Taoiseach - they did not seek change but would not rule out any proposals about change which might be presented.

Secretariat

9. The British were not prepared to contemplate any change in the status of the Secretariat; Burns, in emphasising this, said that the Secretariat could only be suspended by moving it elsewhere and this was a prospect which filled the British with "intense gloom". The only way forward he could see would be to do something which would be cosmetic and known to be cosmetic. In this regard, a possible answer might be found in the staffing problem the British would have if inter-party talks were to take place. The NIO had a comparatively small staff in Northern Ireland - only one Under Secretary, Oliver Miles (the British Joint Secretary), on the political side - and in such circumstances they would have to refocus the work of the staff who would, during this period, have to spend a high percentage of their time dealing with the inter-party talks. They could say to the Unionists that "Oliver Miles is now devoting time to the talks and spending little time in the Secretariat". This was, of course, a fig-leaf but "we don't see any other and we shouldn't look for any other".
10. The Unionists had been brought to the present stage, where they were interested in dialogue, partly because of the attitude taken by the two Governments and partly because they now saw the need for progress. If either Government

were now to talk to the Unionists about the need for suspension of the Secretariat, they would "up the stakes" - the NIO were chary of trying to manufacture concessions for Unionists on the grounds that they would immediately "up the ante".

Next Step

11. The next step was for Peter Brooke to have talks with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, which would allow both Ministers to have an exchange of views on the prospects for political development. Burns said he would be surprised if Ministers decided at this meeting (31st January) to launch any fresh initiative. He suspected that they would probably agree on future Conference dates (i.e. with the organisation of a gap, probably straddling Easter, in mind) but perhaps, for tactical reasons, they would only announce the date of the next Conference. They could not afford any initiative to fail (he presumably meant through signalling it publicly at too early a stage). They were still at the stage of progress being possible, not probable.
12. A number of people in the Unionist party were putting pressure on Molyneaux to come off the fence on which he had securely anchored himself. Paisley was easier to deal with, as he tended to follow the party line, and he had actually been spending more time on theological than political issues over the past six weeks. The Executive of the DUP had voted at Paisley some time later, on his return from a trip abroad, had claimed that this in fact had been his own idea and position. The OUP, on the other hand, was fractured. Molyneaux had been afraid for a long time that Paisley would overtake him on the right; in fact he was now in danger of Paisley overtaking him on the left.

13. Burns went on to envisage a meeting at an early date of the main parties - including Alliance but not the local Conservatives - under the Secretary of State's Chairmanship. After generalised talks, they would probably break into small groups. At an early stage, they would need to conduct dialogue with us. Dublin was part of the relationship and its development could not be discussed without us. Unionists indeed saw the "whole thing" (presumably meaning the search for a definitive solution) as being pointless unless Dublin were part of it. We emphasised the crucial importance of our being present at talks from the beginning. Burns, in response, simply said that the British had no position on this as yet. However, he could not see any party not being prepared to discuss the North-South relationship simultaneously with us.

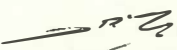
Summing up by Burns

14. In summing up, Burns again said that the prospects for progress were now more favourable. Unionist preconditions had softened and there were signs that people were beginning to address their minds to issues of substance. The SDLP were beginning to think of trading with the Unionists, while the DUP wanted to get into talks as they felt they could achieve something. Finally, there was a group in the OUP who saw the need to stop shouting and to get on with the work. They wished to come to inter-party talks with a view to negotiating rather than to asserting claims.
15. The NIO have been trying to let OUP party pressure grow on Molyneaux. They welcomed what Nicholson had said and noted and appreciated the Taoiseach's response the previous day.
16. Peter Brooke, like Tom King, was if necessary prepared for the long haul; he did not see his Northern Ireland responsibility in terms of either "death or glory" and was

not prepared to sacrifice the possibility of progress "on the altar of personal ambition".

Our Response

17. The Dublin side concentrated on conveying two messages - the need to ensure that the Agreement was not undermined in any way in pursuing the present political possibilities and, secondly, the crucial importance of getting the format of any talks right from the beginning (i.e. that the three relationships must be addressed simultaneously).


Dermot Gallagher,
24 January, 1990.

cc: PST; PSM; Mr. Nally; PSS; Mr. Mathews; Mr. Brosnan;
Counsellors A-I; Box