



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Nally/Butler Dinner, London, 7 December 1990

1. The following notes were taken at the dinner table and are not exhaustive. Present on the British side were Sir Robin Butler, Len Appleyard (Cabinet Office), John Chilcot, Joe Pilling, Robert Alston (NIO) and Nigel Broomfield (FCO). Present on our side were Dermot Nally, Noel Dorr, Andrew O'Rourke, Dermot Gallagher and the undersigned.

JOHN MAJOR

2. Butler opened discussion of the general political situation with some thoughts on the new Prime Minister. He recalled that he and Andrew Turnbull (Principal Private Secretary) had been at the Treasury with Major and had worked closely with him on the 1986 public expenditure round which had made his political reputation. Major's ministerial experience was wide, but it was brief and included none of Ireland. He had, however, left Hurd and Brooke in charge of Anglo-Irish policy (Butler was suggesting that the policy would continue). The Prime Minister was honest, straight and had a good mind. He would not get into issues until he had to, but would then immerse himself. The departure of Mrs Thatcher had removed a very potent, strong force from the scene, but John Major had his own strengths; he was someone you could deal with, relaxed, well-briefed, extremely easy, certainly not a cypher.
3. Butler's message seemed to be that Major would not get involved in Anglo-Irish affairs until he had a role to play, ie, until Brooke's initiative had matured or played out. We could then look to a substantial meeting between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister. There was some division on the British side on the meeting next weekend in Rome. Butler and Chilcot seemed to envisage some discussion of Northern Ireland, a brief review of the political talks and the security situation (but not "the shopping list as

such"). Broomfield, however, emphasised the briefness of the meeting ("10 to 15 minutes") and the need to discuss European issues. Butler concluded that the meeting would be a getting-to-know-you session and agreed with Dermot Nally that it should be sold that way to the press afterwards; he added, however, that it would not be just a chat however brief, Major would be well-prepared for what Chilcot called "the registering of a mutual agenda".

4. O' Rourke pointed out that Anglo-Irish relations were not limited to the North ; there were east/west issues also, including a trade relationship worth 10bn pounds a year. On the question of a more substantial summit meeting later, Dorr asked the British side to reflect on the fact that there had been no substantial meeting at head of government level in the five years since the Agreement. If, say, France and Germany had signed an agreement of equal importance, it could be expected that Mitterrand and Kohl would be meeting to discuss it every six months.

PRESIDENT ROBINSON

4. The British side showed keen interest in President Robinson's election, the more liberal mood it seemed to reveal in the electorate, the effects it might have on the political agenda and the possibility of a visit to the North. They asked about the President's powers. Dermot Nally explained the ceremonial and very limited nature of the President's powers, the close liaison between the Aras and the Taoiseach's Department, the necessity for formal consent by the Government to any travel outside the State, and the President's own anxiety to avoid conflict with the Government.

EXTRADITION/BIRMINGHAM SIX

5. There was a brief discussion of extradition. The British side did not expect the issue to generate so much heat on the surface as it had done in the Thatcher years, but warned that the deeper effect on Major might be even

~~warned that the deeper effect on Major might be even~~ stronger than on Thatcher. Dermot Nally referred to the transport difficulties in the Ellis case, explaining the sensitivities on our side, and asked that they be avoided in the future. Broomfield said the RAF had expected diplomatic clearance and would not normally fly at the behest of the police, but he noted the point. Dermot Gallagher made a presentation on the Birmingham Six referring to the breakthroughs in the confession evidence through ESDA testing and on the forensics through the Home Office inquiry. He expressed worry that the DPP would defend the case robustly in the appeal court and referred to the pressure for bail and for the Irish Government to stand surety. Chilcot was reticent ("the case is now in the hands of the court") but not unsympathetic in reply.

POLITICAL TALKS

6. Dermot Nally asked why there was such emphasis by the British side on the internal arrangements referring back to Sunningdale and saying that the SDLP would never again agree to to a devolved arrangement without the involvement of Dublin. Chilcot did not accept that there was such an emphasis; there was certainly a wish to see a revival of "genuine political life"; but there was a three-stranded approach. Dorr gave a resume of the position under Article 4 of the Agreement and of the present context which was outside the Agreement at the insistence of the Unionists themselves. Gallagher said the Unionists were wriggling out of the card they had given Brooke to start the North/South talks. Willie Ross's statement and letter to the Guardian had clearly been issued with Molyneaux's authority. There was a depth of unease in the Nationalist community about devolution outside the framework of the Agreement. They remembered Stormont and they had current experience of Belfast City Council. The talks could not focus on a narrow six county context; a devolved arrangement in that context only could not be sustained and it was unfair to ask it of people who would be putting their lives on the line.

7. Nally said that one party could not sew up substantial progress or heads of agreement before wider talks began. The provision that nothing would be agreed until everything was agreed, was not how things worked in practice. He raised the question of the EC and said that some form of institutional arrangement between North and South was desirable on EC issues. Butler took a written note of this point.
8. Chilcot said we were seriously misreading the British Government (Nally: "I was talking about the loyalists"). He compared our position to a pedantic "word count" analysis of Shakespeare. The unionist parties were democratic parties with massive support, "we can't change them". He knew we wanted the British side to pressure them, but they could not do so even if they wanted to. Responding to earlier criticism by Gallagher that the British had alienated Nationalists by not implementing the Agreement as well as Unionists by signing it, Chilcot threw open the question of what each side thought the other had hoped to gain from the Agreement. In response to Dorr's invitation to give his view of our expectations, he said he was sure we were "massively disappointed", but the Agreement did not represent joint authority and we were putting great strains on the Secretariat as a pressure absorber and complaints machine. Dorr said the British had held up implementation of the Agreement in order to appease the Unionists, but to no effect. One point which our Ministers found very hard to understand was the invocation of parliamentary privilege against providing us with information in good time on important matters.
9. Following this robust exchange of views, Chilcot concluded to our surprise that a solution could be worked out in the next few weeks. Invited to repeat this, he confirmed that he was talking of a solution; he would not be more specific but said his side would be talking to us in a couple of weeks. We referred again to the recent public statements by

Unionists about Brooke's role. Butler asked a bit impatiently, "why not call their bluff?". Personally, he had not understood all of the language used around the table, but we should try to go forward and he was very much more hopeful as a result of conversations in the last two weeks.

Comment

10. A few things struck us in conversation among ourselves afterwards. First, was Chilcot's reference to talking to us about a solution in the next couple of weeks. Second, although there was nothing explicit said, we detected serious anxiety about the security situation (in the North? Britain?). Third, our impression that the NIO is very much in charge on the British side was confirmed again. At times, the others seemed less than interested. Butler lapsed into silence when discussion turned to the implementation of the Agreement and the difficulties in the way of talks ("I did not understand the language") and seemed impatient with our fears of Unionist intentions ("why don't you call their bluff?"). Lastly, Butler seemed interested by Nally's suggestion that some institutional arrangement between North and South was desirable on EC issues, and took a written note.



Declan O' Donovan
10 December 1990