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cc per: PSW
re: Molyneux; PSW
re: 12/1/91
J. L. B.
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Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division

Dear Assistant Secretary

A conversation with Richard Ford

I had a conversation yesterday with Richard Ford about the forthcoming talks. Ford, who is on the Times' political staff, enjoys good access to the Unionists since the period he spent in Belfast as the Times correspondent there.

The following are the main points of interest which arose:

Overall assessment

- Ford has had conversations this week with Molyneaux, Paisley, Robinson and most other senior Unionist figures.
- From these conversations, he is firmly convinced that the talks will not reach the second strand. Molyneaux remains extremely uncomfortable about his involvement in the entire process. At some stage in the course of May, Ford believes, he will "pull the plug" and there will be a OUP walkout. How the DUP will react to this (i.e., whether Paisley follows Molyneaux or stays put) remains unclear.

Molyneaux

- The eternal procrastinator, Molyneaux has believed from the outset that he would never find himself actually taking part in talks. He assumed that Dublin and the SDLP would refuse to accept one or the other of the Unionist preconditions and that the preliminary discussions would end in an impasse. He was, therefore, delighted with the controversy over the 5 July statement last year which, he hoped, would kill off the initiative.
- Thereafter, Molyneaux made clear in various conversations with Ford his expectation that Dublin would not retreat from its insistence on a clear guarantee about timing and on the Unionists not forming part

of a UK delegation. He was unpleasantly surprised when the Irish Government and the SDLP accepted compromises on both points. "You caught him on the hop", Ford observed. "He didn't think that you would finally go down that road".

Frank Miller takes the same view

In order to preserve his credibility, Molyneaux had to accept the new terms and sign up for the talks. From the comments he made to Ford this week, however, and even from his body language (he seemed very dejected), it is clear that the OUP leader wants out of the talks before they reach the crucial second phase.

Ford expects that at some stage in the internal talks Molyneaux will inform his electorate that the SDLP are demanding power-sharing; that this will not work; that the SDLP has shown an unwillingness to consider any other options; and that, therefore, it is pointless for the OUP to continue. His gamble will be that he, rather than the devolutionists, is more accurately interpreting the wishes of most Unionists (i.e., that there is no widespread desire for power-sharing or even for devolution).

Paisley will be left in a very difficult position, torn between loyalty to his OUP colleague and pressure from Robinson and others in his own party to stay at the talks. On the former point, Paisley told Ford recently that he and Molyneaux had reached a private agreement with each other that they would stick together for the duration of the talks. However, there is no doubt that the talks are far more important to the DUP than to the larger party and that the DUP stands to lose most from their failure.

The DUP has been consistently more enthusiastic, both in public and in private, about the talks. Robinson's comment to Ford this week was: "When will an opportunity like this come round again? We want to get stuck into the talks and we want to get a deal". He indicated that considerable work has already been done within the DUP in preparation for the talks. When Ford spoke to Paisley this week, the latter was no less positive about the talks than his deputy. Ford was also struck by a comment made to him by Paisley some weeks ago. Paisley told him that there would "have to be give all round" in the talks and that "I'll have to get my party to accept that".

In making his walkout prediction for Molyneaux, Ford entered one reservation. Just as Molyneaux has hitherto allowed himself to be dragged along by others, so the question must arise whether he will not finally allow himself to be pressurised by Paisley into staying at the talks. On balance, however, Ford considers it likelier that the OUP leader will leave. As one of his senior colleagues suggested to Ford this week, he may indeed see a value in "cutting the ground from under the devolutionists" by declaring the talks to be futile and walking out. A gesture like this would not merely harm his opponents within his own party but would also seriously undermine the DUP and perhaps help to finish it off as a separate party.

- It is, however, very likely (in Ford's view) that Molyneux is out of step with majority Unionist thinking and that Paisley is reading the mood more correctly. Ford, who has never rated Molyneux highly, considers him to be a politician of limited perspectives who is happiest doing nothing and is incapable of bold, longer-term thinking. He is not nearly as shrewd as many imagine him to be. He will be hard pressed to offer credible reasons for a walkout. He has, in any event, been short on credibility throughout this process. Nobody believed Molyneux, Ford recalled, when he tried to blame Dublin last year for an intransigent attitude - and his recent revival of this criticism (in response to Brooke's statement announcing the talks) merely "produced yawns in the House".

Delegations

- Molyneux indicated to Ford this week that he will use his nine colleagues on the OUP team in accordance with their "particular expertise". He also suggested that all nine of them would be in constant rotation "in and out of the room". Ford interprets this as a move by Molyneux to frustrate attempts by specific colleagues to put pressure on him.
- Paisley, in contrast, will be flanked at all times by his two MP colleagues.
- Ford understands that, having received an indication that he would be part of the OUP team after all, John Taylor retracted the statement he had earlier issued (in which he warned Molyneux to keep the UUC in the picture). Molyneux indicated to Ford, however, that he would be keeping Taylor very much at arm's length.

Venue for the second strand

- Ford believes that the Unionists will refuse Dublin or anywhere near it. Molyneux told him this week that he wants London. His argument (which Ford disputed) will be that London is appropriate as the Anglo-Irish Agreement was largely negotiated there.
- Ford's own suggestion was that a venue "near the border" for the opening meeting, followed by a rotation between Dublin and Belfast, might find acceptance with some Unionists. He had no clear ideas for the border venue but suggested, half-facetiously, that the Unionists might accept somewhere in Cavan, Donegal or Monaghan (relying on a strict interpretation of "Ulster").

Financial arrangements

- Ford (who heard of this from DUP sources) understands that, following the example of the Atkins talks, the NIO hopes to offer salaries and secretarial allowances to delegates. The aim would be to induce the Unionists to stay at the table for the duration of the talks (and, hopefully, to recognise the similar attractions of a permanent

Assembly). The incentive would be directed in particular at the DUP, many of whose representatives have no steady jobs.

- Ford recognises that the SDLP would have difficulty in accepting payment. His own view, however, is that, since these talks clearly involve negotiations (and are therefore more important than anything which has preceded them), the party's acceptance of allowances (to cover secretarial services etc.) should be defensible.

Media arrangements

- Ford understands that journalists based in Belfast are to be accredited to the talks later this week. Some of them are actively reviving low-level contacts in the various parties (on the assumption that they may hear more from them than from the leaders). Ford's own expectation is that, despite official assertions to the contrary, there will be off-the-record briefings from the NIO during the talks.

Conclusion

- Ford believes that, should the initiative end with a Unionist walk out, the two Governments will be in a strong moral position. They will have made clear efforts to bring the Unionists aboard in some form. Having failed in this objective, they will have no option but to return to the normal operation of the Agreement. While mutual recrimination between some of the participants is inevitable, the alliance between the two Governments will, in Ford's view, be unaffected. The Anglo-Irish Agreement and the relationship with Dublin are simply too important to the British Government.
- In the longer term, Ford believes that some form of federal Ireland must emerge. The British Government would like nothing better than to see the Unionists reach an agreement with Dublin on this. If the present initiative is brought down by Unionist intransigence, the consequent reduction in sympathy for the Unionists at Westminster and Whitehall will strengthen the hand of those British policy-makers who favour an eventual ending of the Union.

Yours sincerely



David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer