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<b>Reference Code:</b>	2021/45/208
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28 October 1991

Mr. Sean O hUiginn  
Assistant Secretary  
Department of Foreign Affairs  
Dublin

Discussion with Mr. John Chilcot

Dear Sean

In the course of a recent courtesy call on Mr. John Chilcot, Head of the NIO, a number of points of possible interest cropped up in our conversation and these are summarised in the following paragraphs.

The speeches of Mr. Brooke and Mr. Hurd at the Tory Party Conference in Blackpool were purely party speeches, Mr. Chilcot said, and it would not have been appropriate to clear them in advance with the NIO. Unlike Mr. Hurd, Mr. Brooke did not have a political adviser. He felt that on our side we had over-analysed and over-parsed the words used and read too much into them. They in the NIO were, perhaps, less academic in their approach to language of that kind. I said I had been to Blackpool and was impressed by the vehemence with which Frank Millar of the Irish Times defended his interpretation of what was said. Perhaps he had been given a special briefing or had the passages concerned interpreted for him. Chilcot professed not to know since civil servants were not present. With regard to the recent Brooke interview with Frank Millar of the Irish Times, Chilcot said that the Secretary of State had in fact been avoiding such an interview for up to two years, until in the end he could escape no longer. I formed the impression from Chilcot's attitude that in retrospect it might have been better if the interview had never taken place. (You will see from a separate report that Mr. Brooke was also somewhat defensive about parts of that interview).

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The Taoiseach's proposed meeting in Dublin with Prime Minister Major was briefly discussed. Making the point that the Taoiseach favoured discussion on fundamental, constitutional aspects of the problem, I added that regular Summit meetings dealing with such matters could usefully complement the talks being promoted by Mr. Brooke. It was difficult, I said, to envisage much progress in talks with the Unionists without having a stick as well as a carrot. It was not at all clear, I said, to me as a newcomer to the scene, that the Unionist leadership had any real intention of engaging in serious dialogue. If they had they would not have engaged in so much procedural gimmickry. Chilcot's reaction was rather vague. He spoke of the merits of the Terence O'Neill approach in the 1960s and noted that with very few exceptions the present crop of Unionist politicians had never tasted power. My comment on that was that when Unionists had total, unsupervised power for 50 years they abused it to such an extent that it had to be taken away from them eventually in 1972. The British Government had made the serious mistake of putting into Belfast in 1921 a Parliamentary and Government system based on the Westminster model. Such a system only operates in a normal, democratic climate where power can alternate through the ballot box. That possibility never existed in Northern Ireland where the Unionists had a guaranteed two to one majority in an artificially created area. To compound the mistake, Westminster failed completely to supervise and monitor what was happening in Northern Ireland. Whereas individual Unionist politicians today may have had little if any experience in government their Community had exercised unlimited power for far too long. Having vetoed so many initiatives aimed at involving the minority community in the management of Northern Ireland's affairs, they found themselves by-passed eventually in 1985 because of their own intransigence. Some prolonged sulking was to be expected and it was not at all clear that their leaders were yet ready to engage in meaningful negotiations.

I thought it would be tactically useful at our first meeting to adopt a fairly hardline, uncompromising approach, given the fact that Brooke and the NIO seem to be searching for concessions and sweeteners at our expense for Paisley and Molyneux in order to get them back to the table.

We had a brief discussion about the Guildford Four and the other Irish cases that have recently rocked the administration of British justice to its very foundations. I formed the impression that Chilcot himself and other fair-minded people in high places I have met here since my arrival are still gravely embarrassed by what happened.

Mr. Chilcot expressed himself as certain that such serious miscarriages of justice will never be possible again. He was

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keen to find out that effect that whole experience had had on the Irish Community in Britain. He had been told that for a long period after 1974 it had withdrawn into itself.

One other matter that Mr. Chilcot raised, albeit rather diffidently, was Sinn Fein. I got the impression, rightly or wrongly, that this is a matter engaging his attention in some tentative way and that he was keen to get a reaction from me. He noted, for instance, that we had not taken any action on Gerry Adams's recent letter. I confined myself to the observation that a couple of Sinn Fein Councillors had recently been the victims of loyalist gunmen. What effect those killings would have had on Sinn Fein would be interesting to know, I said. Chilcot seemed to believe that Adams had become genuinely dovish.

Although it may have no special significance, I nevertheless thought I should mention the fact that Chilcot raised the subject of Sinn Fein with me at our first meeting. Has he or any of his NIO colleagues done so in the past in London or Belfast?

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

*John Small*

Ambassador

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unusual  
in a  
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