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28 November 1991

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29/11

Conversation with John Chilcot

Dear Sean

I had a long discussion with John Chilcot, Head of the NIO, when he joined me for lunch at the Embassy today. What follows is a summary of the main points of interest that were touched on.

1. Brooke's talks with the Unionists

- (a) Venue: Chilcot was not present at the talks and was unable, therefore, to report on the flavour of the meeting. However, he seemed to be well informed on the details of what transpired and was prepared to discuss them freely. He was mildly optimistic that a basis could be found for getting the talks restarted. The Unionists want the venue to be Westminster. When questioned as to the precise meaning of Westminster in this context, Chilcot said that London would be a more accurate place name. While this location had originally been proposed by Molyneux, Paisley now saw merit in it also for a variety of reasons, including a desire to remove the talks from the media glare and leaks experienced in Belfast. This sounds rather rich coming from Paisley! Another explanation proffered by Chilcot was Paisley's fear that as a central player in the talks, failure in Belfast could be pinned all too easily on him. Molyneux the integrationist would, of course, be very happy with London - the seat of sovereignty and government.

- (b) Composition of Delegations: The Unionists would also like to see a reduction in the negotiating teams from 10 to 3 or 4 per delegation. Chilcot speculated in that connection that 3 would probably be Paisley's preferred figure. That would mean that MacCrea and Robinson would be his collaborators. The use of a fourth would necessarily mean the addition of someone like Sammy Wilson from the political rather than the religious wing of the DUP. What about the Alliance Party which is not represented at Westminster? This question was put to the Unionists by Brooke and they seemed to acquiesce. The Secretary of State will be seeing John Alderdice and John Hume to ascertain their attitudes to the Unionists' proposal. He will then have a further meeting with the Unionists, immediately before or after the next Anglo-Irish Conference meeting on 18 December. He mentioned that Alderdice was getting more and more frustrated and impatient about the whole process, but he (Chilcot) saw merit in keeping the Alliance Party on board to maintain the existing symmetry.

- Yes, according to NIO briefing*
- (c) Venue for Strand 2 talks: Asked whether the venue for strand 2 talks had been raised at Brooke's meeting with the Unionists, Chilcot said he understood it was not at this stage.
- (d) Chairmanship: Had the choice of Sir Ninian Stevens as Chairman been raised in the talks? This matter had been raised by Brooke because of Paisley's negative remarks three months ago. The NIO is reasonably happy that this will not be an issue.
- (e) Procedure: There seems to be a definite lack of clarity regarding the manner in which the talks proposed by the Unionists would be conducted. The Unionists seem to envisage a mixture of bilateral and multilateral meetings, on occasions without the Secretary of State, that would get into substantive matters. The frequency of such meetings would be two, possibly three, per week. What about the "gap" aspect? Chilcot believed that this question would only arise at the multilateral stage - not when bilateral discussions are taking place.

(f) Timing

I tried to draw Chilcot on a new starting date for talks if all other aspects had been cleared up. Although imprecise in his remarks, it is clear that there is no prospect of the talks starting before the New year.

(2) Scenario in event of Labour Government

I asked Chilcot whether he and his Department had yet given some thought to the situation that would arise in

the event of a Labour victory, with Kevin McNamara as Secretary of State. He said that nothing of this kind is likely to be done while there is still some life in the talks process initiated by Brooke. It would be too risky to conduct an alternative exercise of this kind in case word leaked out. The Labour Party policy is only in sketchy, outline form. Chilcot then mentioned that before the election there would be a series of meetings between Major and Kinnock dealing with the work of the various government Departments. The NIO would be involved in this exercise and Chilcot assumed that Kinnock would be accompanied by his appropriate Shadow Spokesman at each of these meetings. Speculating on the Unionists' strategy in giving the impression that they are prepared to engage in a new set of talks under changed conditions, I put it to Chilcot that the possibility of a Labour victory may have entered into their calculations. If that were so they may have concluded that it would be in their interest to be back on the talks trail again before the election and have gone a credible distance without however entering into substantive commitments before the general election. In that way they may feel that a new Labour Government would be morally bound to continue with the talks, rather than start implementing the radical policies adopted at the Brighton Party Conference. In other words, this gambit would be a form of insurance involving a very low premium with the possibility of cancelling the policy completely if the Tories should retain power. Chilcot nodded vigorously in support of this thesis and told me confidentially that he, too, had come to the same conclusion. He had seen John Taylor and Kevin McNamara on a TV programme in Belfast three or four weeks ago and was interested in the way Taylor seemed to be playing up to McNamara, saying what a good relationship the Unionists had had with previous Northern Ireland Secretaries of Labour Governments like Roy Mason. Chilcot also agreed that by engaging in political talks the Unionists would be responding to the demands and expectations of their own community. I should mention here, perhaps, that Seamus Mallon informed me last night that he perceives a change in the attitude of ordinary Unionist people in the North. They are anxious to see talks progressing and expect their politicians to engage in meaningful negotiations. He would venture further and say that whereas those Unionists would not at this stage go so far as to change party allegiance, at the same time they are beginning to show some interest for the first time in the views he expresses about future political arrangements. This is a new experience for him.

(3) Scenario in event of Tory victory

From his remarks it was quite clear that Chilcot envisages a change of Secretary of State in the event of the Tories retaining power. A new Secretary would obviously take some months to settle in to his new position but in all probability the British Government would have a life expectancy of up to five years. This would be in contrast to Ireland's situation, he said, as our next general election would be drawing closer.

(4) Alternative approach

I put it to Chilcot that there was no evidence whatsoever over the past 70 years that the Unionists had ever voluntarily made a political move or gesture towards the nationalist Community in Northern Ireland. It was becoming increasingly clear that the normal processes did not work with the leaders of that Community - certainly not with the current set of leaders. That was why they had to be by-passed in 1985. We should be prepared to entertain thoughts about alternative approaches to the problem, if as may well happen, the Unionists are not prepared to engage in meaningful talks. When that point is reached there should be no question of leaving the field to the paramilitary activists. An indication that the two Governments would then have to consider new arrangements above and beyond the Anglo-Irish Agreement would surely help to focus the minds of the Unionists. Gentle persuasion and cajoling would have to be abandoned. The Unionists have learned certain lessons from the 1985 experience: sulking and boycotting did not get them anywhere and that lesson will not have been lost on them. I suggested that this is the kind of pressure that the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister are in a position to exert. Chilcot, perhaps feeling that it may be our intention to propose this approach next week at the Dublin Summit, said that this is not a matter that could be dealt with fully at one meeting. There was the possibility of a quite different approach - that mentioned in Article 4(a) of the Anglo-Irish Agreement - although he could not see a Conservative Government showing any interest in it. Chilcot emphasised the fact that Brooke is a firm believer in doing something about the democratic deficit and has a strong preference for the patient, consultative approach. A more radical approach could not be expected from him before the next election. Incidentally, I was informed that Brooke is likely to be included in Major's delegation at the Dublin Summit. It will be recalled from my report of 8 October

on my first meeting with Sir Robin Butler that I proffered the line to him that frequent meetings between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister - meetings that touched on fundamentals - could help to focus the minds of the Unionists and force them into meaningful negotiations.

(5) Chief Constable Annesley's call on the Prime Minister

I raised this subject with Chilcot, remarking that, according to accounts, he was not accompanied by the GOC. His reply was that in case we had any worries, Annesley was one of several people attending a meeting dealing with terrorism and related matters. The purpose of the visit was not to discuss internment. (Perhaps this meeting was related to the Maastricht Summit.)

(6) Sinn Fein/IRA

Once again Chilcot seemed keen to talk about Sinn Fein and the IRA and made reference to a possible scenario he attributed to John Hume where there could be an outbreak of peace before new political structures are in place. He felt there was a ferment within these organisations although clearly the doves had not yet achieved a majority on the IRA army council. The two organisations had demonstrated over the past 10-15 years a capacity to change, for example, by abandoning abstentionist policy towards local authority councils.

(7) Internment

We had a brief discussion on internment, with Chilcot saying he hoped we had accepted their assurances in that regard. I said it was about time someone in authority muzzled the military officers who had been briefing the press over several weeks. I have arranged a courtesy call on Tom King for 10 December and would appreciate guidance on any matter the Department may wish me to raise on that occasion.

Conclusion

John Chilcot acknowledges privately that the scenario most favoured by the Unionists is a hung Parliament where they would hold the balance of power. By extension that could mean that they would seek to bargain away the Anglo-Irish Agreement as the price for their support. As this may be the last meeting between the Taoiseach and Mr. Major before the next British election, this is something to bear in mind. The general feeling is that the election will be very close and a motley collection of Unionists, Scottish and Welsh

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nationalists, with up to twenty votes between them, could in theory decide who governs Britain next time round.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Joseph Small". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Joseph Small
Ambassador