



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Confidential

17 May 1991

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division

Dear Assistant Secretary

A conversation with Seamus Mallon

In a conversation last night, Seamus Mallon made the following points of interest about the talks process:

- He and his party colleagues have found the past three weeks deeply frustrating and exhausting. Mallon has been telling the more junior members of the SDLP team, however, that this is "a mere skirmish" compared with what may still be in store. "We must concentrate on winning the war - and not get too upset about the preliminary skirmishing".
- His private estimate is that the way will be cleared over the next few days for plenary talks in strand one to begin. His expectation is that, in the contacts currently taking place, enough common ground will be found to enable these talks to open, if not next Monday then shortly thereafter.
- He does not exclude the possibility, however, that, a plenary session having taken place, the Unionists might propose that the talks continue on a bilateral basis with the Secretary of State. He has heard suggestions that the Unionists may be contemplating similar proposals for strand two and suspects that they may try out this approach in strand one.
- His expectation is that the Unionist leaders will utilise the opening session of strand two in London for the purpose of berating the Irish Government on Articles 2 and 3. They will then announce that, as no satisfaction seems forthcoming on that issue, they will not be prepared to participate in the substantive talks in Northern Ireland. In order to protect the Unionist interest, however, they

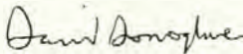
will send along three second-rank representatives (Mallon speculated that these might be Ken Maginnis, Chris McGimpsey and one other) to the NI talks. He suspects that these representatives may refuse to take part in plenary sessions and insist instead on bilateral meetings with the Chairman.

- All along, Mallon commented, the Unionists have sought to make the second strand conditional on "substantial progress". It is now clear that they are intent on defining this as some action in relation to Articles 2 and 3.
- Should it become clear that the Unionists intend to sabotage the second strand, Mallon plans to keep his contributions during the first strand to a minimum. His concern is that the record will contain an inaccurate and compromising account of his position if it should turn out that the discussions do not proceed beyond the first strand.
- As regards the chairmanship issue, Mallon believes that the Unionists genuinely thought all along that Brooke would chair both the first and second strands. It seems to have occurred to Brooke very belatedly that a problem was looming in this regard. He raised it for the first time with the SDLP only towards the end of last week. The SDLP's attitude is quite simple - it has no objection to an independent chairman appointed by the two Governments. The role of "other participating parties" in this matter is one of "consultation" only - there can be no question of a veto.
- Mallon pondered the choice which would have to be made, in selecting a Chairman, between some internationally renowned figure (who would have no more than a general understanding of the problem) and a lower-profile figure who might have a compensating ability to grasp nuances. On the whole, he preferred the former option, which would have the additional merit of being seen to raise the problem to an international plane.
- Mallon was strongly critical of Brooke's behaviour in relation to his ultimatum on Tuesday. He told Brian Mahwinney over lunch yesterday that Brooke's credibility will evaporate rapidly if he allows his ultimatum to be side-stepped by the Unionists. He added that "the Irish Government has had to bail him out" all too often during this initiative and that their patience will run out eventually.
- Mallon is very happy with the composition of the SDLP's team for the talks. They are working well together - Hume providing the "philosophy"; Mallon trying to keep the discussion close to the detail; McGrady assisting in this respect; Denis Haughey keeping the party's official note; and Mark Durkan providing valuable political analysis.
- Mallon elaborated on his own overall attitude towards the talks process. He is conscious that Hume has misgivings about this

particular process and its ability to deliver the kind of solution which is required. While he understands these misgivings (and very largely shares them), he considers nonetheless that the process is worth pursuing to the full for a number of important tactical reasons. In particular, he sees an opportunity, in the "pressure cooker" situation to which all the parties are now being subjected, to place the current Unionist leadership under strain and to force shifts in traditional Unionist thinking. Difficult as the present situation is for those parties which are relatively united, it is considerably worse for two parties which harbour a fundamental distrust of each other.

- As an illustration of the bad feeling between the OUP and the DUP, Mallon cited a public altercation in yesterday's NI Committee debate between Paisley and Trimble. As an illustration of the tensions within the OUP, he mentioned that, when he asked Ken Maginnis privately last week to say what he wanted to achieve from the current process, Maginnis told him that he hoped to "shaft" Trimble. Following Mallon's RTE interview last weekend (which accused Trimble and Taylor of "lying"), Paisley and Maginnis came up separately to Mallon during the week to applaud him for his remarks.
- Mallon believes that, as the process continues, "the cracks are bound to show" in the Unionist camp. It is possible, indeed, that Molyneaux's leadership may be challenged. While neither Taylor nor Trimble would command sufficient support, he could imagine possible compromise candidates who could take over without much difficulty.
- In sum, therefore, Mallon feels that, even if the process collapses, there will be advantages for both the SDLP and the Irish Government in the internal effects which it will have on Unionism and in the weakening of the latter's standing with British and international public opinion.

Yours sincerely



David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer