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Reference Code:	2021/93/15
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Meeting with John Hume

20 December, 1991

1. I met John Hume in Dublin on 20th December. He gave me an account of his meeting with Mr. Brooke the previous day, which tallied in all essential respects with the briefing given to us by British officials (see Mr. O' Donovan's report of 22 December): The British had outlined the scenario for the gaps, as envisaged by the last Conference. The SDLP had said they would have a problem getting their delegations below five (but offered some flexibility as between numbers at the table and those away from it: Hume felt, and I agreed, that the notes made by Denis Haughey and Sean Farren on the previous occasion had been valuable in keeping the Irish Government briefed). Hume had argued that it would be sensible to have the larger numbers present so as to avoid breaks in the talks for wider consultations. He had linked the discussion of number to the argument on venue, saying that Northern Ireland would be the most practical and economical venue for those involved in his party. He had no objection to Stormont Castle, rather than the Parliament Building, and as regards media management he had said the real solution to any problem here was for the participants to simply avoid speaking to the press and had pointed to the record of the SDLP on the previous occasion. He had argued for Strand Two meetings to take place in a London-Dublin-Belfast sequence (in fact the earlier agreement was London-Belfast-Dublin) and when this had been pointed out had withdrawn the point. He also stressed the vital importance for the SDLP of having Strand Two before the election. The party had also raised the possibility that an election might not take place until June, giving an unacceptably long gap, but this point was not insisted upon.

2. On the possible post-election gap, Hume had insisted very strongly that they would not wish any language to be used which implied the SDLP had a view on a change of administration. It was urged on him that this was to cater for the Unionist position and he had responded that he could not be associated with their view. Mawhinney had emphasised the Irish Government did not have a difficulty with this. Hume said that this did not affect his strong feelings on this point. (He has in fact been in touch with Kevin McNamara, who subsequently rang Mr. Joe Hayes at the Embassy in some agitation). Hume said he had resisted the British attempts to hurry matters forward, stressing his need to consult the Irish Government and his own party colleagues before the meeting between Mr. Brooke and the four party leaders which was proposed for around 7 January.

3. In my conversation with him, he was very suspicious of Mr. Brooke's motives in trying to link the second gap with a condition of no change in the administration. He felt that if Brooke wanted merely to sign up the Labour party to the talks in the event of a Labour victory all he had to do was work it out on a bipartisan basis with Kevin McNamara who was ready to agree on behalf of his party. He felt that one way or another Mr. Brooke's motives were party political and he speculated that Mr. Brooke might have a personal motive (to make his continuance in office in a new Conservative administration appear essential?) or a party motive related to future relations with the Unionists in a hung parliament after the election. He said he had "a very bad feeling" about the whole thing. He does not however rule out the party leaders meeting in early January. He met the Taoiseach this morning and I understand expects a formal meeting with the Government early in January.

4. He raised briefly the Maastricht Cohesion text, asking whether it excluded Northern Ireland. I said that as far as I was aware it did, and that I assumed the process of amending any Maastricht text would be a very difficult one. I promised I would consult our experts in more detail on the implications of the text for Northern Ireland.

Seán O hUiginn

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