



## An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Meeting between the Taoiseach and the British Prime Minister

Prospects for Political Progress

Briefing Note

1. In the months since the ending of the round-table talks last July, there has been a growing sense of a political vacuum in relation to the North. We might argue that, given the continued active implementation of the Agreement, it is hardly valid to talk in terms of a vacuum. The fact is, however, that the protracted preparation for talks and the publicity surrounding the talks themselves have generated a widespread expectation of, and support for, continuation of the process. The recent upsurge in sectarian attacks has further underlined in the public mind the need for progress on the political front.
2. The two key issues are (i) through what mechanism is political movement most likely to be achieved and (ii) what is a realistic timeframe for progress? On the first issue, there has been a consistent difference in emphasis between the British and ourselves - their stress throughout has been on the consensual model while we have emphasised the importance of leadership by the two Governments. As to timeframe, both sides acknowledge that the forthcoming British general election is a complicating factor; in recent weeks, however, we have sought to inject a sense of urgency that appears to be missing from the British approach.

Which Model?

(i) British approach

3. The essential British analysis is that (to quote Mr. Brooke at the last Conference) "we won't get something worthwhile unless we have everybody's thumb print on it". In their view, the main weakness of the

Anglo-Irish Agreement is that it left the Unionists out in the cold - and Unionist hostility is bound to remain a constraining factor on the further development of the Agreement. A central aim in any transcending arrangement must be to bring both communities on board from the outset; any attempt by Governments to "impose" a blueprint is doomed to failure. (The British insistence on involvement of the parties must also be seen in the light of their priorities for talks - given their emphasis on the need to establish devolved structures, it is hardly surprising that they want the parties "thumb-print" on the deal).

(ii) Attitudes of the Political Parties

Unionists

4. Prevarication by the two Unionist parties has been the main factor in the way of a resumption of the round-table talks. They have insisted that a "new basis" must be found for a return to the negotiating table but have not been very clear as to what that new basis might be. There are various interpretations of the Unionist behaviour: the more optimistic view, which the British would have us accept, is that the Unionists are basically seeking some face-saving device and that, before or immediately following the election, they will be ready to re-engage in talks with some minimal adjustments to the negotiating basis. A less sanguine, but perhaps more realistic, view is that Molyneaux has no serious interest in the three-stranded process, that Paisley (increasingly under the influence of McCrea) has no intention of involving himself in dialogue with Dublin, and that the Unionists will continue to prevaricate well beyond the general election.
5. Last week's meeting between Mr. Brooke and the Unionists can support either interpretation. The British stress

the very positive mood of the meeting, the continuing Unionist commitment to the essential elements of the 26 March approach, their desire not to leave a political vacuum and not to allow the forthcoming election stand in the way of progress. On the other hand, a good deal of what the Unionists are reported as saying can scarcely be considered reassuring: their emphasis seems to have been almost exclusively on Strand One, with a strong hint that they would expect to see significant progress on internal issues before engaging in Strand Two discussions. In proposing more informal and largely Westminster-based talks, the Unionists would probably hope to sideline the Irish Government for as long as possible - talking to Dublin only when the shape of a deal (satisfactory from a Unionist perspective) was clearly in sight.

SDLP

6. For their part, the SDLP have shown a degree of scepticism about the talks process from the outset. They question whether the Unionists have any genuine intention of engaging in serious negotiations; they have also been nervous that the talks might undermine the Agreement without putting anything better in its place. On the whole, however, the present SDLP attitude towards the talks process is undoubtedly more positive than at the outset. They see the three-stranded structure as vindicating Hume's analysis of the nature of the problem; their experience of the few weeks of talks reassured them that tactically and presentationally they have the edge on the Unionists; the fact that the Agreement did not suffer from the talks experiment seems to have lessened their concern about potential damage. While there is of course a considerable spectrum of opinion within the SDLP, the general tendency now is to favour a resumption of the talks at a very early date on the same basis as before.

(iii) Our Approach

7. From the outset, we have emphasised to the British the dangers involved in giving the Unionists a veto on policy development; everything in the history of Northern Ireland points to the need for the two Governments to take the lead in mapping the way forward. The consensual approach would be everyone's preferred option if it were likely to work - however, in present circumstances, there is no realistic basis for assuming that it would in fact achieve results in any kind of acceptable timeframe. Particularly with the upsurge in terrorist and sectarian attacks, the responsibility lies clearly with the two governments to devise the policies and structures that would bring us closer to a settlement.
8. Given the continuing British conviction that the round-table talks process can be revived, and that it offers the best prospect for making progress, we are unlikely to succeed in any attempt to persuade them to move to an alternative or successor strategy at this stage. In the circumstances, our own concept of the two governments providing leadership might best be presented as both complementary to and a safety-net for the round table talks.
9. The point can be made to the Prime Minister that, even if talks are resumed, it will be crucial to a successful outcome that the two governments jointly should have a shared sense of the desirable outcome. Only such a leadership role by the two governments will give the talks the necessary coherence and direction; the parties themselves may not have the capacity and almost certainly lack the political manoeuvrability to enable them to devise and reach agreement on an institutional blueprint. In practice, the best hope of a successful outcome is for

the two Governments to develop their own model and to try to build agreement towards that model. The safety-net aspect is also important: if it should transpire that, despite our best efforts, it proves impossible to revive the round-table talks over the coming months, we should ensure that we are not left empty-handed and having to develop a successor policy from scratch. In either circumstance, any work done now between the two Governments will certainly not be wasted.

Timeframe

10. The question of timeframe is obviously very closely linked to the substantive issues<sup>9</sup> touched on above. With the Prime Minister's attention engaged elsewhere, and increasing doubt as to whether (even assuming a Conservative victory) Mr. Brooke is likely to continue in his present post after the election, it is unlikely that the British expect to do more than keep things ticking over on the political front for the coming months. The point can be made very emphatically to the Prime Minister that there is increasing frustration on this island at what is perceived as the Northern problem being put on the back burner. The time between now and the election must not be wasted in spasmodic and inconclusive contacts with the Unionist leadership. If in fact there is no realistic prospect of an immediate re-start of talks, then the two governments must establish a mechanism between them to take forward the exploration of options, with officials being instructed to develop recommendations and report back to the heads of Government at a relatively early date.

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