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7/12*

"Talks about Talks" - Reflections on
the present situation

1. This note offers some general reflections on the present situation in regard to the so-called "Brooke Initiative".
2. While we have continued discussion and exchange of papers over the past year, we have always been privately somewhat dubious about the prospects that the "initiative" could really lead to a new Agreement involving all parties and transcending the existing Anglo-Irish Agreement. Nevertheless we have continued discussions and have indeed compromised on various points in an effort to get the Unionists into discussions and also, of course, because we have not wanted to see Dublin blamed for a breakdown.
3. It is difficult however not to feel a certain sense of unreality about the whole exercise at present in view of the fact that the outstanding issues have been worked over so often on all sides (we also may wonder about the relationship between this initiative and a possible alternative agenda which might ultimately be more fruitful).

A new approach

4. If the initiative is to continue in its present form, then there might be a better chance of reaching agreement at this stage if we could open up some new way into the problem rather than continuing, through the intermediary of the Secretary of State, the direct textual confrontation between ourselves and the Unionists on the remaining two or three core issues which has characterised the past six months. Ingenuity and drafting, which may get both sides past a difficulty when an issue is fresh, reaches the limit of its usefulness when that same issue has been thoroughly worked over, over a long period of time. The raw edges of the underlying issues show too clearly through the verbal covering; and even if they do not, then each side will believe that it can still see them under any compromise formula offered by its "opponents".

Approach to the Unionists by the SDLP?

5. Beyond this it is, I suggest, even more evident as time goes on that it is not right in principle for the Irish Government to accept that the Secretary of State, however well meaning, should be the intermediary between its position and that of Nationalists in Northern Ireland on the one hand and the Unionists on the other. Furthermore, and apart from the principle of casting the British Government once more in the role of mediator between the two Irish

traditions, it seems to me that Mr. Brooke, though very well intentioned, has not over the year or so that this initiative has now continued proved to be very adept as "facilitator".

6. If we are to look for some different point of entry to the problem, I wonder if we could not consider again the possibility of some more direct channel to the Unionists (preferably with Mr. Brooke's blessing)? One way to do this would be for John Hume to talk direct to Paisley and Molyneaux on the basis of a text agreed in advance with the Government here. Offence to Mr. Brooke could be avoided if our Minister talked the matter out with him in advance to let him know what we are doing (referring back to Mr. Brooke's own comments last Autumn to us when he encouraged the idea that the SDLP might talk direct to the Unionists).
7. If it is now the case that Mr. Brooke is close to the end of the road as his interview on television yesterday would suggest, then there could be merit from our viewpoint in trying this approach now and presenting it to Mr. Brooke as an effort to "go the last mile". This would mean contacting Mr. Brooke; and suggesting that, before he gives up finally, we would like to try the approach of putting a proposal through John Hume and the SDLP to the Unionists in the hope that they could together work out a position which could resolve the remaining difficulties.

Begin with East/West strand?

8. Even if we don't take this approach but maintain the dialogue through Mr. Brooke, could we still find some new point of entry to the problem by exploring the idea that, instead of beginning with the internal Northern Ireland talks, the whole process might begin at the other end - that is with the East/West talks between the two Governments. If it began in this way i.e. with the third strand, then the role of the Irish Government would have been established formally from the outset and this might make it easier for us, within the framework thus established, to allow the first strand (i.e. the talks between the Northern Ireland parties) to get under way without an absolutely firm timeframe for the opening of the second (i.e. North/South) strand.
9. At first sight this might seem somewhat contrived since it might be claimed that a meeting of the two Governments was no more than another meeting of the Conference which in theory is not supposed to meet during the "interval". There would however be two points of distinction between the East/West talks and the Conference proper: (a) Some (full) Government Ministers other than Mr. Brooke might be involved on the British side. Perhaps even a meeting between the Taoiseach and Prime Minister could be arranged as formal opening of the East/West strand? (b) The Northern Ireland parties could be present as observers (though the Unionists would no doubt refuse on the ground that it was only the Conference by another name unless the matter were carefully

handled and situated in advance as part of the wider framework of talks on the three "strands").

A two-tier gap?

10. Apart from the two foregoing ideas, there is of course always the possibility of considering a "two-stage gap" as suggested earlier in our internal discussions. The idea was to balance the "conditionality" of which the Unionists still insist on for the opening of North/South talks with an equal and opposite "conditionality" for the second part of the "interval". Thus the "interval" would be initially for a period of x weeks during which talks would begin between the parties in Northern Ireland. The Conference would resume meeting at the end of that interval. But if by then North/South talks had begun, the interval would be extended for a further y weeks. While this approach seems worth mentioning for completeness it is not put forward here with any great conviction that it would resolve present difficulties.

N. Dorr
Secretary
6 February, 1991