



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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SECURE FAX NO. 483

TO: HQ FROM: Belfast
FOR: A/Sec Gallagher FROM: Joint Secretary
DATE: 15 May, 1991.

Political Talks

1. Robert Alston briefed me this evening. I understand the Secretary received a detailed account of the Downing Street meeting from John Chilcot who was in attendance but the following may be of interest:
 - The Unionist statement at lunchtime had not only baffled the British but caused "profound depression" ("consternation" was another word used here today). As he had already said to camera with unusual candour, Brooke had reversed his advice to the Prime Minister to see the Unionist leaders because, having said they wanted to see him to seek clarification and give their answer, they had then turned around and given their answer in a public statement. The Prime Minister had decided, however, that he should see the Unionists and Brooke believes he was right to do so. In his debriefing with his own officials, he emphasised the determination of the Prime Minister to get Unionist agreement today for the talks to proceed.
 - It was agreed that plenary sessions of strand 1 would go ahead on Monday and that the Unionists would receive clarification on the question of the location in Northern Ireland for strand 2, the identity of the independent Chairman and the associated question of the Chairman's powers. Alston said these were issues which would have had to be discussed with the parties anyway and that they would have had to be "comfortable" with decisions on them. (Comment: There is obvious danger, however, that these "loose ends" will continue to interrupt the process until they are settled.)
 - In light of this straightforward account, I asked about Brooke's caution in talking to the press afterwards (still "possible rather than probable", agreement "in principle"). Alston saw nothing odd in Brooke's reaction after the difficulties of the past two weeks but neither did he see any specific reason why Brooke should have been so cautious.
 - I asked about the Unionist reference to clarification of the "basis" of Brooke's proposal (they asked for assurance that the word "basis" in para. 2 of his proposal referred only to strands two and three and not to strand one.) I said this was puzzling since the

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to strand one.) I said this was puzzling since the proposal was clearly titled "Practical Issues concerning Strands Two and Three" and the word "basis" could refer only to those strands. Alston agreed that this was so. His explanation was that it is a tactic of Paisley's when he is going backwards to spend a lot of time clarifying something that is actually perfectly clear; and he had in fact spent a substantial part of the meeting with the Prime Minister going on about it.

- There is no element of conditionality in regard to Articles 2 and 3 in the agreement that was reached (Comment: it does seem, however, from the Unionist press comments, that they will need to show satisfaction about our willingness to discuss Articles 2 and 3 at the first meeting of strand 2 in London before they will attend meetings of strand 2 in the North. They seem to have obtained some assurance that the British Government would state its position on Articles 2 and 3 at the plenary meeting.)
- The British side sought to guard today against the possibility that the Unionists would think that they could see the Prime Minister every time an issue arose (Alston was unspecific, however, about how they thought they had accomplished this).
- The British thinking on location in the North remains strongly in favour of Stormont Buildings if that can be agreed. Hillsborough is not in the frame at present because Stormont is the preferred Government Building but it may yet be considered. Other possible locations reported previously are the Harbour Commission and the Cultra Centre. The Conference Centre at Aldergrove has now been added to this list. There has not yet been an in-depth assessment of any of these places.
- There has not been any further development in British thinking on the identity of the independent Chairman since my SF 479 today and letter of 14 May. Alston pointed out, however, that the Unionists themselves seemed to assume in comments to the press today that the independent Chairman could not be from Britain or Ireland. The British themselves have not taken this view. //

2. General Comments:

- Notwithstanding all the difficulties of the last two weeks and the bad blood between the Unionists and Brooke which was evident today, Alston has argued this week that the Unionists are "on a fast learning curve" and that as each hurdle is surmounted, exasperating and repeating though the experience is, progress is made.

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It was not too long ago that very few took seriously the prospect that the parties would be talking with each other, and with the Secretary of State, still less with Dublin which has been the difficulty behind all the argument about venue and Articles 2 and 3.

- The British themselves have absorbed enough of our thinking over the past year for Alston to suggest to me that we all have to be patient, that it is important to get things right, that this is a historic process which may take two years and that it is a major achievement that painfully and slowly the Unionists have been brought to accept, first the principle of the three relationships and now one of the practical realisations of that principle, i.e., that they have to talk with Dublin.
- The British were impressed by the pressure on the Unionist leaders last weekend to get their act together and sort out the venue problem. (Comment: The pressure coming from the Unionist grass roots and through the media has been exceptional. I was particularly struck by the editorial in last Saturday's Newsletter "Of Mountains and Molehills" which was critical of the Unionists for "breaking their vow of silence ... within a day".)
- Alston mentioned incidentally that although the DUP are more cohesive than the UUP team at the talks, they have a major embarrassment in their midst in the person of Willie McCrea. The British have been given light relief by the horrified reactions of the UUP to close acquaintance with McCrea. It seems that every time he opens his mouth, his colleagues cringe with embarrassment. The NIO thinks that McCrea may depart the DUP team, perhaps on the grounds that he is unprepared to talk with Dublin.