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Round-table Talks, Stormont:
Overview Note of Second Week of Plenary Sessions, Strand
One, Monday 24 June - Wednesday 26 June, 1991

Ms Anderson

1. The second week of plenary sessions in Strand One of the round-table talks ended today at Stormont. This note attempts to draw together an overview of the week's developments, together with an assessment of these from an SDLP perspective. As usual, this is based largely on the views and notes of Denis Haughey and Sean Farren of the SDLP Liaison Group. More detailed notes on the proceedings on Monday and Tuesday (today's detailed note not yet available, but a summary at paras 8-11 below) are contained elsewhere on this brief.

Sequence

Monday, 24 June

2. The morning session on Monday was taken up almost exclusively with questioning by Seamus Mallon of Ian Paisley on the latter's opening statement. At over two hours, this was the longest exchange in the series of "cross-examinations" of opening statements. Denis Haughey's view was that Mr Mallon did very well, putting Dr Paisley under pressure on several issues. He exposed fairly starkly that the DUP's "vision" of the future remained extremely narrow, notwithstanding the more open-sounding language of sections of Dr Paisley's introductory statement. Mr Mallon succeeded in establishing, for instance, that in explicit terms Dr Paisley rejected the notion of the equality of traditions and identities and that the South continued to be viewed by him as in essence a hostile foreign country. On the other hand, in his own terms, Dr Paisley appears to have "given a

good account of himself" and while indulging in what Mr Haughey described as occasional "tirades", he for the most part retained his composure.

3. The afternoon session was taken up with Dr Mawhinney's questioning of Dr Paisley, and the questioning of Dr Mawhinney by representatives of the four parties on Mr Brooke's opening statement. A point of interest to emerge in the former exchange, for instance, was a comment by Dr Mawhinney to the effect that if the British Government had "demanded" the deletion of Articles 2 and 3, it might have "sourred relations (with the Irish Government) without achieving anything". In the same sequence, Dr Paisley conceded that there was a resentment towards British Ministers among Unionists (and he believed among Nationalists). In the questioning of the British statement by the parties, Dr Mawhinney said that any change (in arrangements in NI) would involve "the British Government accepting that the status quo is not going to be acceptable in future".
4. The Monday session took place, of course, against the background of public threats from the Unionists (particularly the DUP) over the weekend that unless the Conference meeting on 16 July was called off the talks "would effectively be over". One of their proposals to get around the 16 July "hurdle" was to have an intensification of the talks process on such a scale as to be able to complete the entire package before mid July! To that end they tabled a paper in the Business Committee on Monday setting out a schedule which they claimed could achieve that effect. The SDLP, backed at this stage by the Alliance, strongly resisted any such moves on the basis that the serious problems being addressed by the process could not be

~~strongly resisted any such moves on the basis that the serious problems being addressed by the process could not be adequately dealt with in this "hothouse" way. The day ended without any decision being reached on the matter.~~

Tuesday, 25 June

5. The day began with a surprise development in the form of a paper from the Alliance party on how the process could be intensified. The SDLP were mystified as to the reasons for the apparent volte face, although they surmised that it was primarily for tactical reasons and as a means of relieving pressure on them from the DUP. It was notable that the paper carried a rider that Alliance had serious doubts about whether the schedule they were proposing was practicable. Whatever the background, the move by Alliance had the effect of increasing the pressure on the SDLP. In that regard, the party appreciated the message of support from Dublin for the strong line they were taking and continued to take on the issue throughout the day. The Business Committee met on the matter a number of times in the course of the day but again without a consensus being reached.

6. When plenaries resumed in the afternoon, Mr Brooke tabled an informal paper (on this brief), titled "General Principles and Perceived Political Realities and Requirements: Key Points". He said that it derived from para 6 of the agreed workplan and was intended by him as an informal aid to the structuring of the general discussion on this item. The next day and a half (effectively until the end of business tonight) were in the event spent debating the topics sketched in Mr Brooke's paper. The debate for the remainder of Tuesday's session covered the topics "Constitutional Status", "Local Institutions" and "External Relationships" (this latter point covered relations with the

South).

7. During this debate there was a number of interesting contributions, the details on which are reported in the note on Tuesday's proceedings on this brief. What was also of significance was that this was in effect the first "free-flowing" debate of the process, with contributions from many delegates who had not spoken before. There was particular interest in an exchange at the end of the evening between Peter Robinson and John Hume, during which Robinson made the point that if Unionism was to reassess itself in the way John Hume was calling on it to, the "threat hanging over it from the South" would have to be removed - in the same way as a more positive spirit had entered into relations between Nationalists and Britain once it became clear that the latter was no longer the threat it had been. It was notable that Articles 2 and 3 were raised frequently by different Unionist delegates and was the item which received most prominence.

Wednesday, 26 June

8. Today's plenary session was given over to the continuation and completion of the debate on the topics contained in Mr Brooke's informal paper tabled yesterday. Again there was significant Unionist emphasis on Articles 2 and 3. John Hume made the point to them that up to recently it had not been an issue - why the sudden prominence in recent years? Paisley replied that it was the "weakening of the constitutional position of Northern Ireland" through the Anglo Irish Agreement which had prompted the renewed concern about Articles 2 and 3. Moreover Unionists perceived new attitudes in the South; from a situation where a change (in relation to the Articles) seemed entirely out of the question, it had now become something worth campaigning for. Alderdice made the general observation that, of course, all the debate on the Articles should more appropriately be held

over until Strand Two!

9. Among the other items covered today were the question of a possible Bill of Rights (not ruled out by Unionists), security and the possibility of joint referenda, North and South. In regard to the latter, it was interesting that this too was not ruled out by the Unionists. They made clear that they are very "reluctant" to associate themselves with anything which would appear to give the South a "veto over the internal affairs of Northern Ireland" but "showed interest" in an observation by Denis Haughey during the debate that "it should not be beyond the wit of all of us involved in this process to come up with a formula which will allow us to say that 'the people of Ireland have spoken'".
10. Mr Haughey mentioned to me that Paisley and Molyneaux were not present for some of the debate today and that in their absence a "more forthcoming attitude" (generally) was noticeable among the two Unionist delegations.
11. On the question of intensification of the schedule, Mr Haughey said that the issue seemed to have "faded away" in the course of the last 24 hours. The Business Committee met today a number of times but the primary item on the agenda was the handling of a paper which the British side want each party to submit by Friday (28 June). Essentially the British side are now engaged in an exercise to establish how much common ground exists between the parties on the basis of proceedings to date. They have asked that each party set out in this paper their perception of such common ground and the issues they see as remaining to be addressed. Mr Brooke distributed this evening a preliminary paper (on this brief)

setting out British views on the matter as the situation stands today. On receipt of the contributions of the parties on Friday, the British side will revise their paper and have it ready for presentation to the plenary session next Monday. It is envisaged that this paper and the contributions of the parties will form the basis of the plenary debate next week. The SDLP propose to table as their contribution a slightly revised version of the "Requirements" paper. (Mr Farren and Mr Haughey will be in touch with us tomorrow about the details; as you know, they have asked for some assistance.)

12. On the question of the Strand One time-table, Mr Haughey said that the sides would meet on four days next week - Monday to Thursday - with evening sessions each day except Thursday. As the SDLP understood it, next Thursday (4 July) will be the final day of this phase and they were not aware of any plans to have further sessions the week after next, as was envisaged at one point this week. This means that in effect the Unionists have given up on the idea of trying to complete the process by mid July, and the SDLP sense this evening was that the "pressure is now off" in that regard. Given the volatility of developments to date, the situation could, of course, change but that was the view within the delegation this evening.

Assessment

13. Again the sense within the SDLP was of a mixed week. Paisley's antics over the weekend on the July Conference issue did not augur well, but in the event - as last week - the atmosphere within the conference room was generally low key and again "business-like". The first item of the week on Monday was Seamus Mallon's cross-examination of Paisley - an exchange which certainly had the potential to be

difficult but which, as matters transpired, was relatively relaxed. It is interesting that, to date, the Unionists' demeanour before the media tends to be considerably more agitated than it is in the privacy of the conference room.

14. The major "flurry" of the week related to the "intensification" issue, with papers being tabled first by the DUP and then by the Alliance party. But Mr Haughey said that it was his sense that, as it became clear over the last couple of days that they were not going to have to enter Strand Two before the 12th of July, the Unionists became noticeably "more relaxed". In the latter part of the week, there were, as indicated, a number of interesting debates.
15. Having said that, the overall sense within the SDLP delegation is that it is too early yet to say to what extent (if at all) the Unionists are serious. Mr Haughey said that they (the Unionists) remain "fearful" and "very cautious" and certainly among the two leaders there is little or no evidence of any movement on the fundamentals. It was noticeable that Robinson began "to make a move" this week, but his apparent readiness for more open thinking appeared to be shared by very few colleagues within the two delegations. (There is also the question of to what extent even Robinson's apparent openness is tactical as much as real - ie "nice cop to Paisley's tough cop".)
16. Nonetheless the SDLP remain on the whole reasonably upbeat about how matters are going. It was to be expected that the Unionists would be slow to move from their entrenched positions and Mr Haughey believes that a steady process of engagement could well eventually begin to "wear down" some of the extremes. It is clear though that what is ahead is "the long haul". This evening nobody within the delegation

was making any prediction as to just how long that haul would be and the precise terms under which the Unionists were likely to return to the conference table in the Autumn (or possibly beyond).

17. Mr Haughey commented that one of the surprises of this week's session was the able performance of Alderdice. After what was regarded as a poor opening statement, he has this week been making some interesting and authoritative contributions, something which, according to Mr Haughey, has forced a slightly upward revision of his reputation within the SDLP delegation!

Q. C.
T O'Connor
26 June 1991