



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code:	2021/93/49
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Secret

Round-table Talks, Strand One, Stormont;
Overview/Assessment from SDLP Perspective

Ms Anderson

1. This note attempts to draw together an overall (preliminary) assessment of the talks process from an SDLP perspective. The note is primarily based on a long conversation last night over dinner with several members of the SDLP delegation - Seamus Mallon, Joe Hendron, Denis Haughey, Sean Farren, Tommy Gallagher and Frank Feely - and a meeting over lunch with Mark Durkan today. While no doubt John Hume will have conveyed the overall "flavour" of the party view to Mr Gallagher (to be supplemented at the Government meeting tomorrow), it may be of interest to have the personal and initial perspective of a number of other senior members of the delegation. (Having said that, it will quickly become clear that the note primarily reflects the views of Seamus Mallon!)
2. Mallon was in sombre and even depressed mood in the initial stages of the evening. To that extent the early part of the occasion had something of the character of a wake - or a post-mortem! - but over the evening the irrepressible good humour of Joe Hendron and Frank Feely had the desired effect on his mood!
3. Mallon indicated at the outset that he did not intend to attend today's final plenary session in Stormont; instead he proposed to travel directly to London to attend - and participate in - the Commons debate. His reason for so doing was that he regarded today's session in Stormont as a "personal platform" for Brooke and that no meaningful exchange - in terms of the object of the process - was going to take place. Besides, if a final session had to be held

at all, he saw no good reason why it could not have been held last evening. He accepted that he was in a "minority of one" within the party on the issue (the remainder of the delegation proposed to - and did - attend). (I should also add that his comments were made entirely without rancour vis-a-vis his SDLP colleagues - it was very much a personal decision/gesture of his own and he saw it as having no significance whatsoever beyond that. He also wished to be in London early to brief a number of key Westminster contacts on the outcome.)

4. Much of Mallon's sense of depression stemmed from his belief that he is going to be the one left "carrying the can" for the ending of the process - "Mallon in charge for one day and pulls plug!". He said that if there were "any hint of that" today he "would take off the gloves"! His SDLP colleagues at the dinner were in more upbeat mood and sought to reassure him that his fears in this regard would prove to be unfounded. I suggested that on the basis of how matters had been left on Monday (with John Hume indicating that the SDLP's first question yesterday on Mr Brooke's return would be to query the timetable), he clearly had no option but to proceed as he had when yesterday's plenary commenced. He seemed to accept this - although he appeared determined not to be cheered up on the issue!
5. On a wider level, however, there is concern within the party that the SDLP may "catch some of the mud" for the breakdown of the talks. They suspect that this may be part of the Unionist tack in the Commons and in press briefings today. There is also concern that Brooke, in outlining to the party leaders why he was bringing the talks to a close, referred in the first instance to the SDLP's "inability to table substantive proposals". On a more encouraging note, Denis Haughey told us however that he was approached by Mawhinney last evening as he left Stormont to assure him that "there

was no basis whatever" for their fears in this regard; the Secretary of State's speech would apportion no blame to anyone (this note is being written prior to the Commons statement, but certainly on the basis of the final plenary this morning the British side have not (so far) pointed any fingers in the SDLP's direction).

6. There was, Mallon argued, a further reason to be gloomy: in retrospect, the SDLP had got it wrong, he believed, in pursuing the analysis-requirements-structures sequence. He accepted his full personal share of the collective responsibility for the tactics, which in advance appeared to have an impeccable logic and which he had supported fully. He believed, however, that in the event the discussions got "bogged down" in the whole identities debate - "there is no crisis of identity; we all know who we are: the real issue is how we translate the rights stemming from those identities into structures and institutions". To that extent he had come to see merit in the Unionist argument that while reaching an agreement on "common principles" would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, there was a lot to be said for constructing an "institutional blueprint" as the first step; it would quickly become clear whether or not it met the requirements of individual parties.
7. Mallon felt that, in retrospect therefore, it might have been wiser for the SDLP to have come out in the first instance with a detailed blueprint for all-Ireland structures and let the debate have taken place from this starting point. [I should add that some of Mallon's SDLP colleagues - including Haughey and Durkan - would not share his view in this regard, believing that the analysis/requirements formula was a necessary route to go down tactically; they agree however that it should not be necessary to repeat the exercise in any future scenario.]

8. Having said that, Mallon believed that an even more fundamental lesson to have emerged from the process was the irrefutable confirmation of the thesis that no solution is possible "within Northern Ireland" - ie which has as its basis an agreement among the parties in Northern Ireland. The solution could only come about through the interaction of the two Governments. That was now clear beyond any shadow of doubt. He predicted that, in the absence of an initiative between the two Governments, no process similar to the one which was now ending (ie between the parties in Northern Ireland itself) would take place "within the next ten years".
9. As to the question of timing of an initiative by the Governments, he said that that was a matter for Dublin to decide. His own view was that nothing should be attempted before October - "nothing happens in the British system over the summer". He recognised that October was pushing close to election time and it was "a matter of judgement as to whether this was a good or a bad thing". Incidentally, he added - and this was a view echoed strongly by the other delegation members present - that the Government had "played the situation very well and without fault, tactically", up to this point.
10. As Mallon's mood brightened during the evening (with some help, as mentioned, from Joe Hendron and Frank Feely!), he felt that there were a number of pluses arising from the exercise:
 - It had welded the SDLP as a party into an effective and cohesive unit. The view of the group last night was that the party had functioned in an unprecedentedly united and efficient way throughout the process.
 - The Agreement had held up "rock solidly". Even in the

potentially most difficult and awkward circumstances, the Agreement had proved itself "bigger than everybody" and was now entrenched probably "beyond demolition". Mallon, of course, acknowledged that there were some potentially "sour" days ahead between the British and ourselves, but felt hopeful that that squall would pass, because "essentially we all need each other".

The "educative process" within Unionism - a necessary prerequisite to ultimate harmony and stability in Ireland - had undoubtedly been advanced by the process. Mallon believed that the Unionists were taking away from the exercise "some very uneasy messages". Apart from a further demonstration of the reality that the Agreement is not "going to go away", the even more profound message for Unionism is that time is not on their side and that the "quality of their cards" continues to diminish.

11. Mallon was also interesting in his assessment of the main players in the exercise. As you will have gathered, his view of Brooke continues on a negative curve. From the outset, the latter's primary agenda, he believed, was the "bringing in of the Unionists from the cold". That remained his preoccupation right to the end. Interestingly, **Mawhinney**, by contrast had gone up somewhat in Mallon's estimation. Nobody was under any illusions as to his basic political instincts, but they (the SDLP) were impressed with the fact that he appeared to be a Government Minister first and a Unionist second; there was unanimous praise, for instance, for his performance in the chair on Monday when he conveyed - explicitly and repeatedly - some hard truths to the Unionists in regard to the constitutional position of Northern Ireland (see note of this discussion elsewhere on this brief). The SDLP view was that the message was

conveyed in terms more explicit than had ever been done before and was all the more sobering for Unionists for the source from which it came. The SDLP noted that Mawhinney's characterisation on the same occasion of the Nationalist aspiration to a united Ireland as a "valid proposition" had been presented in a way that was perhaps also new and certainly helpful from an SDLP perspective.

12. Mallon felt that Paisley had confirmed that he remains an essentially "malign" influence. He continues to operate in a bullying and hectoring way and there was "not the slightest evidence" of readiness for fundamental compromise. Moreover, his way of operating in the conference chamber was not conducive to meaningful dialogue. He answered questions with "12 minute sermons" and was frequently evasive and woolly. The exercise also confirmed as far as Mallon was concerned that Robinson ultimately flatters to deceive. In Mallon's view he does "not have the guts to come out from behind Paisley". His questions in the plenaries were largely "technical" and devoid of vision. For Mallon he was a great disappointment. [Again, I should add that the judgement of some colleagues within the SDLP on Robinson would be somewhat less harsh than Mallon's; their view would be that it is unrealistic in present circumstances to expect Robinson to "go for broke".]
13. Molyneaux performed predictably and in his own terms probably quite well. He was a reluctant participant from the outset and overall gave little or nothing away. Mallon thought that there were some interesting figures within the UUP delegation - McGimpsey, Empey, Maginnis and even Cunningham in his own way. It was clear however that they ultimately did not have any real "clout" within the party and to that extent their influence, regrettably, was marginal. Mallon's view however was that the future in that regard was "not entirely without hope".

14. Mallon was scathing of Alderdice's role (in contrast to the sense among some SDLP delegation members last week, as indicated in last week's overview note). He saw Alderdice as "intrusive", that he did "not know when to shut up" and that he basically "retarded" the process of dialogue between the SDLP and the Unionists. Mallon cited a number of occasions when interesting avenues of exploration were opening up between the SDLP and the Unionists only for an intervention by Alderdice to "take the discussion off in a completely different direction". Joe Hendron made the point that, in the nature of the circumstances, Alliance was able to carve a role for itself in now supporting an SDLP line, now a Unionist one; in the delicate scheme of things their contribution was frequently crucial - he regarded it as "outrageous" that a party so "unrepresentative" should have been in a position to be that influential.
15. Sean Farren suggested that one of the possible lessons of the exercise was that if there were to be a similar one in the short term - and it was a very big "if" - it would be desirable to have the three strands taken forward as one. This of course was essentially the initial intention on this occasion also and the wisdom of the approach was borne out by the frequency with which issues surfaced which were clearly matters for Strand Two and Three.

Conclusion

16. In terms of providing an opportunity for an unprecedented dialogue between Nationalism and Unionism, the SDLP view last night and this morning was that the exercise, while perhaps ultimately failing, had been interesting (if frequently frustrating) and certainly not a waste of time. Useful lessons had been learned for the future and certainly SDLP morale and cohesion as a party had been considerably enhanced. The party's overall judgement, remained, however,

that, as they had believed all along, this was not the forum in which the "ultimate business" was going to be done. The case for the argument that only the two Governments could bring the necessary breakthrough was now irrefutable. In the SDLP view, that may perhaps prove to be the exercise's greatest legacy.

T O'Connor

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3 July 1991