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Discussion with Frank Millar 29 July 1991

I had lunch today with Frank Millar London Editor of the Irish Times. He feels he has made the transition successfully from his position as General Secretary of the OUP through a period as television producer and researcher (with LWT) to his present role as a writing journalist. He is quite satisfied with his coverage of the NI talks over recent months and looks forward to in-depth coverage of the run-up to a British election which he hopes will not take place until Spring.

Much of our discussion was general but we did discuss the talks in relation to Northern Ireland at some length.

He himself is quite sceptical about the prospects for any serious outcome and the prospects for a resumption of the talks in the Autumn. This seems to derive mainly from his scepticism about Molyneaux and his belief that Molyneaux has no real willingness to engage in serious talking with a view to working out a settlement. He believes that Paisley would accept some kind of local administration imposed by the British Government even if it meant some kind of power-sharing arrangement.

He was interested in my view of Peter Robinson. His own description was that "Robinson is in the wrong party". He clearly sees him as someone who might be prepared to negotiate a deal but he also acknowledged that the process so far had not really succeeded in bringing forward the second echelon of leadership who might be less intransigent than Molyneaux and Paisley.

Millar mentioned a story which he had run in the Irish Times in early July to the effect that the Unionists were willing to move within days to Strand Two of the talks. He said he had "sourced" this story more thoroughly than any journalist would normally do and found it stood up.

In further discussion he explained that a proposal from Paisley at about that time for an intensification of the talks had contained (in paragraph 4 ?) an ambiguous reference to the early opening of North-South talks. The Alliance party, taking up the Paisley proposal, had put forward specific ideas which showed that the proposed intensification would require meetings of Strand Two to open in London, then move quickly to Belfast and then to Dublin. Some on the SDLP side had taken this as a kind of "reductio ad absurdum" - as if to show how ridiculous the Paisley proposal was - but it appeared to have been serious. He had run a story (on a Friday or Saturday ?) that there was a genuine Unionist willingness to move quickly to Strand Two. No one had picked up this and then on Monday

or Tuesday two NI journalists Norman Stockton (UTV) and Tom Kelly had more or less independently begun to run a similar story. At this point Paisley had come in again and "rubbished" the idea.

The point of all this was that Millar believed that there was a serious Unionist willingness signalled in the ambiguous reference to move to North-South talks and crystallised by the Alliance Party's taking up the idea. If the Irish Government had responded the idea could have been nailed down. However the chance was let pass. He was curious about this and asked me if the Irish Government had deliberately rejected the idea - perhaps in the belief that the period around 12 July was not conducive to progress?.

I explained in response that so far as I knew we had no serious perception that the Unionists were willing at that point to come quickly to North-South talks. It might still have been necessary to think whether it would be wise to do so immediately before 12 July but we had no sense that there was really a serious proposal to this effect being put forward.

Millar also asked whether we could not have deferred the Conference meeting of 16 July in order to test Unionist seriousness? He understood the difficulties we saw about any change in the agreed arrangement but could we not have spelled out a series of conditions including the opening of North-South talks and set a new and unbreakable date in early August to test Unionist bona fides? I made the obvious points about our concern that this would erode the Agreement to a degree where there might never be another Conference and our unwillingness to move the goal posts in this way in face of a great deal of evidence since the gap began that the Unionist leadership was looking for every possible way to avoid a face to face meeting with the Irish Government in strand two. He accepted that this position was reasonable against the background I described while still wondering if the approach he advocated might not have finally challenged the Unionists either to "put up" or show themselves to be at fault for the fact that the process had not gone anywhere.



N. Dorr
Secretary
29 July, 1991