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FOR: A/Sec O hUiginn FROM: Joint Secretary

Mr. Brooke's Meeting with the Unionists
London, 12 December 1991

1. With reference to my SF 1208, Robert Alston gave me a briefing this-morning. He mentioned that the Secretary of State had asked that it should be as full as possible.

Summary

2. You will be aware that the Unionist leaders made very positive remarks after the meeting and that Mr. Brooke was also positive although more cautious. Alston's account was interesting and it is clear that Mr. Brooke tackled a number of questions which we had raised here about the Unionists' position, particularly Paisley's. The nature and length of the gap and especially the point at which Strand One moves to Strand Two, is still up in the air although the British have clarified to their satisfaction that the Unionists expect Strand 1 to take up roughly half the (pre-election) gap as agreed last time. Mr. Brooke will want to talk through these and other issues with the Minister next Wednesday.

Hume-Molyneaux contact

3. The Unionists asked first about Mr. Brooke's meeting with the SDLP. Brooke said that he was waiting for a definitive reaction from John Hume (which he had not got as of 6 pm last evening). In regard to contact between Hume and Molyneaux which Hume mentioned at the SDLP meeting with the British, Molyneaux said that Hume had written to him before his party conference drawing attention to his speech which Molyneaux would find interesting. Molyneaux had replied by letter saying he would be delighted to talk to Hume. He had heard nothing since.

*Mr Hume
had not
replied on 12/12*

Unionist Movement on New Basis for Talks

4. The British believe that the Unionists are no longer making such a distinction between the first round of talks and any "fresh talks". This is also evident from public comments by Paisley and Molyneaux who are not highlighting their demand that the talks must be on a new basis. They are referring back to the first talks and, at the least, blurring the distinction.

5. The Unionists confirmed that when fresh talks started they would want to move on from the stage of formal papers, presentations and cross-examination which had already been completed.

Preconditions

6. Paisley reaffirmed that he was happy to resume talks saying that the "spirit of the gap" must be honoured this time meaning, Alston thought, that the gap should be used for serious purposes, not talks about talks. Brooke asked if, when the Unionists talk about preconditions as Paisley has been doing, they are talking

about the same conditions as before, ie, as in Brooke's 26 March statement to the Commons. They said yes. Alston drew my attention to the fact that when Molyneaux was asked about the conditions on Radio Ulster this morning he said they had been settled earlier this year.

The Three Strands

7. Molyneaux quoted the comments of the Prime Minister, at the press conference following the Summit, on the importance of getting Strand One going again. Brooke made it clear that what the Prime Minister was actually saying was that it was important to get the talks process going again. He made this clear because of the concern we felt that the Prime Minister's remark was being misinterpreted by the Unionists (I thought we had ourselves not invested any great significance in it but had viewed it simply as a matter of the Prime Minister wanting to show familiarity with the terminology of the process and not getting it quite right).

8. Brooke put it squarely that the talks would again be based on the three strands. The Unionists agreed but he urged on them the value of a public acknowledgement that they were interested in all parts of the talks process. This drew a "characteristic blustering response" from Paisley who said he suspected that the Irish Government and the SDLP had no serious intention of meeting them and he threw in the complaint that Irish Ministers had recently refused to confirm that Articles 2 and 3 were on the table. The British are well aware of the formula we have used on this point (everything on the table) and noted that the Minister had used it again in his Radio Ulster interview last Sunday. (I should mention that the British were struck by the generous references which the Minister made to Paisley which were reported in Monday's Newsletter. They see the remarks as a response to their request that we should reach out more to the Unionists in public statements.)

Strand Three

9. In a change of mind, Paisley said he was not prepared to accept that Strand Three should take place outside the gap apparently because he was worried that this might compromise the principle that nothing would be agreed until everything was agreed. Molyneaux made no comment. I noted that, in any case, we had doubted the value of this Unionist proposal which was made at their meeting with Brooke last month.

Format of the Talks

10. Brooke asked the Unionists to explain what exactly they meant by "bilateral meetings" which they had been using in public remarks. He pointed out that in private they had been telling him that he would be involved as well, which made any meetings at least trilateral. There was "interesting backtracking" by the Unionists. Molyneaux said that in the Middle East talks, James Baker was now meeting several people at once in his "bilateral" talks and he made it clear that "bilateral" could encompass a meeting of several parties. This sounds like nonsense which Alston accepted. The best sense the British could make of it was that Molyneaux was using bilateral to mean any meeting that was

not a high profile "circus". He wanted meetings to be low key and "friendly".

11. The Unionists repeated that there should be no more than three per delegation in the room at any one time although they accepted that delegations might need to be slightly bigger for Strand Two and said that they themselves would be bringing in "specialists" for those sessions.

12. Brooke asked if they saw a business committee meeting in parallel. The Unionists replied "possibly", but their basic view seems to be that it is no longer necessary in a slimmed-down format.

Allocation of Time in the Gap

13. The Unionists confirmed their understanding that the same conditions would apply as agreed last March, that is, that roughly half the (pre-election) gap would be given to Strand One and that the process would then move to Strand Two. They also confirmed to Brooke that the gap should have sufficient time "to allow all issues to be properly ventilated" and they agreed with him that the arrangements would need to cope with the calling of a General Election. In this regard, Brooke said that he had not talked to the Minister about this matter in detail but would do so next week.

14. Molyneux said that whatever would be worked out should not bind the Unionists to continue the process if Labour were elected. The Unionists could not commit themselves to going on with a Labour Government (he touched on this on Radio Ulster this morning saying the Unionists would have to wait and see what was in the Labour manifesto but would have problems if it contained what Mr. McNamara was saying).

15. Although I acknowledged that it was important to have the confirmation that the Unionists again see roughly half the (pre-election) gap being allocated to Strand One, I said the situation this time is more complicated because of the nature of the gap proposed. I have already impressed on Alston that one of our most serious concerns would be that the Unionists could spin out a pre-election gap in Strand One, avoid any meeting of Strand Two or at least one in Dublin and then opt out altogether after the Election. In these circumstances, I thought we would want to be more precise than last time about when Strand Two would begin (and perhaps also when a session would be held in Dublin although I did not mention this). We could not know when exactly the Prime Minister would call the Election, but we did know the outside parameters and what might be realistic to consider.

16. The whole matter of the nature and duration of the gap pre and post Election is still unclear, but I did gain the impression this morning that the British and the Unionists intend to cover all matters in the pre-election period and to use the finite period envisaged for after the Election as the "extra time" which Unionists have wanted. The length of that period will need to be fixed before talks begin. Alston pointed out, of course, that as part of the scenario, a Conference would occur when the General

Election was called and the "clock had stopped" in the talks process.

Venue for Strand One

17. Brooke pointed out that there would be media pressure wherever there were talks, that there were strong practical arguments for Belfast and that the bulk of the work should be done there. It was Brooke's sense of this part of the discussion that the Unionists would want the first meeting of Strand One to be at Westminster and as much as possible of the talks there or elsewhere in London. They acknowledged that there was strong pressure for Belfast and appeared to accept that talks would be held there, adding, however, that meetings should take place in Stormont Castle rather than Stormont Buildings. Alston thought the reason for this was to save some face and perhaps also to keep the media at a distance since there is a perimeter fence around Stormont Castle. (They made no mention of the Belfast venue for Strand Two but it may be that they will want to have these talks in Stormont Castle also, wishing to avoid the symbolism of Irish Government Ministers on the steps of Stormont Buildings as the seat of the old Northern Ireland Parliament and Government. Alston had no comment on this.) Brooke was encouraged by the Unionist response.

Venue for Strand Two

18. Brooke underlined strongly that any attempt to unscramble the venue formula agreed last May would prejudice the chances of talks taking place. The Unionists argued that the first meeting of Strand Two in London (which is agreed) should not be a matter of a couple of days. They were not specific about how long it should be. Brooke said the formula had not specified a particular duration. He himself suggested a period of up to a week, with a move at that stage to Stormont and thereafter to Dublin (there was no mention of duration for the latter two sessions). The British are not absolutely certain that this is acceptable to the Unionists, but they believe it is.

Press Line

19. Brooke wanted to keep the reports of the discussion relatively low-key at this stage but to his surprise the Unionists wanted to take a much more positive line. He told them that he intended to be somewhat more cautious himself (my SF 1208). I asked Alston about Molyneaux's comment this morning that he thought talks would get under way early in the New Year. Alston said that Brooke had not advanced his thinking. Realistically, it was hard to see how talks could begin before about 22/23 January, which are the dates envisaged for the January Conference. Brooke would want to make a statement to Parliament and would not be able to do this until it resumed about mid January. In any event, Brooke will be on holiday for the first week of January. He does intend, however, to have a further round of talks with the parties before Christmas.

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