

First Session: Monday afternoon: 7 January 1980

Present:

OFFICIAL DELEGATION

Secretary of State
Mr Stowe
Mr Bell
Mr Marshall
Mr Wyatt
Mr Chesterton

ALLIANCE

Mr Napier
Mr Boyd
Mr Cushnahan
Mr Loretto
Mr Cook
Mr Cousins

SDLP

Mr Hume
Mr Mallon
Mr McGrady
Mr Canavan
Mr Duffy
Dr Hendron

UDUP

Rev I Paisley
Mr Robinson
Mr Allister
Rev W Beattie
Mr McClure
Mrs Paisley

SECRETARIAT

Mr Moriarty
Mr Coulson
Mr Cowling
Mr Huckle

The Secretary of State opened the Conference at 3.00 pm by welcoming members of the Conference and relaying to them a message from the Prime Minister wishing the Conference well in its deliberations. At Dr Paisley's suggestion, the Conference stood for a minute's silence to commemorate innocent victims of the present troubles.

- 2 The Secretary of State then outlined various administrative and procedural arrangements for the Conference. He explained that seating at the Conference table would be in alphabetical order by parties and that, although the UUP had declined to attend, places had been left vacant for them and he still hoped that they might change their mind. Proceedings would be conducted with a degree of formality. He suggested that the Conference should usually meet for 5 sessions every week: on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday morning. The Conference Working Paper would be the framework for the Conference. He proposed on the following day to invite the Parties to introduce their prepared policy documents, which would then be distributed, and would be analysed by the Secretariat to see how the points raised in them could best be related to the material in the Conference Working Paper, so that they could be dealt with in an orderly way. The Secretary of State hoped that the introduction of the papers would have been completed on Tuesday, so that discussion could then turn to the issues set out on Page 11 of the Conference Working Paper. Agreement on one item on the Agenda would not be necessary before moving on to the next. Members of the Conference could produce or commission further papers as desired, and any submissions from non-participants would be placed on the table so that the Conference could consider how far it wished to discuss them. The Secretary of State was prepared to see

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any Party not represented at the Conference which wanted to make representations on Conference matters.

- 3 The Conference would be held in private with the Press and public excluded. No official record would be published, although a note would be taken for official purposes. Mr Wyatt would act as the Conference spokesman and after each session would give the Press a brief statement agreed in advance by the Conference. After each week's meetings, the Secretariat would produce a note on the progress of the Conference for use as an aide-memoire for the Secretary of State's use in reporting to his colleagues; this would be circulated at the beginning of each Monday session and members of the Conference would have an opportunity to challenge its accuracy if they so wished.

There was no fixed timetable to the Conference. The Secretary of State said, however, that he would be disappointed if it did not prove possible for him to report the outcome of the Conference to his colleagues in the Cabinet so as to enable them to reach conclusions on the broad framework of proposals which the Government might put to Parliament by around Easter.

- 4 Various points of detail were then raised by members of the Conference. It was agreed that the size of each delegation admitted to the Conference building might be increased from 10 to 12, and that 2 note-takers per delegation should be allowed into the Conference Room in addition to the 6 members in each delegation permitted to sit around the Conference table. It was also agreed that there should be 4 rather than 5 sessions - on Monday afternoons, on Tuesday mornings and afternoons and on Wednesday mornings - and that the sessions should last from 10.30 am to 1.00 pm in the morning and from 2.30 pm to 5.00 pm in the afternoon.
- 5 All 3 Party Leaders agreed that relations with the Press should be as discreet as possible. The Secretary of State commented that whilst Parties were free to talk to the Press as they wished, he would welcome an agreement that they should place themselves under a "self-denying ordinance". Mr Hume said that Mr Wyatt as Conference Spokesman should not answer questions from the Press that went beyond the terms of the agreed Press Statement. It was agreed that Mr Wyatt should restrict his answers accordingly. It was also agreed that members of the Press could be invited to visit delegations in their Rooms provided that they were escorted within the restricted areas by members of the delegation concerned. Mr Hume also indicated that he wished to reserve his Party's position on the Secretary of State's proposed Agenda.
- 6 The Conference adjourned for tea at 4.00 pm.

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7 After a short adjournment there was a resume of conference procedures, and the following points were clarified:

- a. The 2 note-takers would form part of the party delegation for the purposes of claiming expenses and receiving circulated papers.
- b. The Secretary of State would call for adjournments as he saw fit, and other Party Leaders, at their discretion, could ask the Conference to consider adjourning; it was hoped that this would be used sparingly.
- c. In view of the Conference's "self-denying ordinance" on press briefings, the Secretary of State agreed that any briefings which he or other Ministers might (as agreed) give to MPs or minority parties (and indeed any other parties outside HMG) would be based solely upon the agreed texts of the press releases. Any papers or views submitted to the Secretary of State by MPs or minority parties which bore upon the Conference's deliberations would be put to the Conference.
- d. On the question of fees for professional advisors, the Secretary of State said that he had not foreseen any immediate need for parties to incur such expenses. If a party decided that it would benefit from professional advice, such as legal advice, the circumstances should be explained in writing to the Secretary of State and consideration would be given to providing financial assistance.

8 The Conference then agreed to meet (at the times agreed earlier) on the following dates:

8 and 9 January

21, 22 and 23 January (subject to Dr Paisley's resolving difficulties arising from a European Parliament Committee Commitment)

28 and 29 January (subject to Mr Hume's resolving a similar difficulty)

There would be no meeting in the week of 14 January because of a plenary session of the European Parliament: the same difficulty would arise in the second weeks of February and March.

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9 Discussion then returned to the agenda for the next session. The Secretary of State proposed the following:

- (i) Each party in turn, in alphabetical order, would introduce its initial paper and give any oral explanation or amplification it wished.
- (ii) At the close of this introduction officials would examine the papers to determine what common ground and what differences existed on the main topics outlined in the Government's Working Paper (Cmnd 7763)
- (iii) While this was being done the Conference would apply itself to the first of the topics raised on page 11 of the Working Paper - whether there should be one elected body or more.
- (iv) When officials had finished their "ready reference" to the views of the parties on the topics raised in the Working Paper (possibly on Wednesday) the Conference could then consider what if any amendments, abbreviations or deletions needed to be made to these topics and whether any relevant additional topics needed to be added to the list.

10 In the course of the ensuing discussion Mr Hume and Mr Mallon argued that the agenda was unsatisfactory from the SDLP's point of view in that it made no provision for the Conference to discuss the proposals raised by the individual parties in their initial papers. Statements by the Secretary of State, and in particular the 6 points in the statement agreed between them after their meetings on 10 and 15 December, had led the SDLP to believe that the Conference would not confine itself strictly to the topics listed in the Working Paper but would encompass some of the wider background issues. Indeed, it was essential to understand the parties' attitudes of these wider issues in order to put into context their views on the topics raised in Working Paper. Any attempts to restrict the discussion would be seen as a breach of faith. By comparison, many of the questions posed in the Working Paper could be succinctly answered - as they had been in the Constitutional Convention report; nor was it right that officials should determine what the Conference was to discuss. That should be a matter for the decision of the Conference as a whole.

11 Dr Paisley made clear his view that the Conference's primary task was to apply itself to the questions raised in the Working Paper. He would have no objection to discussing any matters raised in the parties' papers which fell within the scope of, or were relevant to, these questions. However, he would welcome confirmation that the subjects mentioned in paragraph 4 of the Working Paper - namely the constitutional status of Northern Ireland, Irish unity, confederation, independence, and the

restoration of either the pre-1972 Stormont Parliament or the 1974 Assembly - would not be subject to discussion. He would also welcome confirmation that parties could submit further papers and views on the subjects under discussion as the Conference developed.

- 12 Mr Napier said that in his view it would not be possible to agree on a precise agenda for discussion until the proposals in the parties' initial papers had been heard. Indeed it would be helpful if these papers could be distributed to the other parties before they were orally introduced.
- 13 In reply the Secretary of State explained that he had no wish to curtail the scope of the parties' initial papers or their oral introduction and explanation of these papers. However, if these papers raised topics which lay outside the general scope of the Conference as defined in the Working Paper, he would not invite discussion of these topics without the general agreement of the parties present; nor would he invite discussion of the topics in paragraph 4 of the Working Paper. As regards the 6 points agreed with Mr Hume, these ^{were} intended to elucidate the basis of the Conference, not to be additions to the agenda. The task of the Conference was to consider the questions raised in the Working Paper. The aim of the synopsis by officials was to clarify the views of each party on these questions and, as such, was intended solely to save time. Similarly, the proposal that the Conference should apply itself to the first of the questions on page 11 of the Working Paper was intended to prevent delay in proceedings. If any party wished to discuss matters which lay outside the scope of the Conference the Secretary of State would be happy to meet them privately.
- 14 Mr Hume said that, notwithstanding these assurances, he could not agree to the papers being introduced without some commitment on the part of the Conference to discuss all of the points raised in the Papers rather than just those points which bore upon the terms of the Conference as defined in the White Paper.
- 15 At this point the Secretary of State proposed that the Conference might best adjourn until the following morning, and Mr Wyatt was asked to read out a draft Press Statement. However the draft, containing as it did a reference to the proposals regarding the following session's business, prompted a further discussion of the range of matters on which discussion would be permitted. After this had gone on for a short time the Secretary of State proposed that the Conference should adjourn for a period of private reflection and consultation.
- 16 Following this adjournment (from 6.00 pm to 7.50 pm) the Secretary of State reconvened the Conference and announced that the business for Tuesday morning would be as follows:

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- (i) The Alliance Party, the SDLP and the UDUP would all introduce their papers in turn.
- (ii) The Secretary of State would then propose an adjournment.
- (iii) Following the adjournment the Secretary of State would invite the Conference to consider how it wished to proceed.

17 The Conference agreed to this proposed course of action and to the attached press / release.

(CGNI/P/1)

18 The Secretary of State adjourned the Conference at 8.00 pm.

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