



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code:	2016/22/1896
Creation Dates:	6 May 1986
Extent and medium:	8 pages
Creator(s):	Department of Foreign Affairs
Accession Conditions:	Open
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Talks about Talks: Correspondence between the
Unionists and Mrs. Thatcher

1. Meeting of 25 February

In the context of their anti-Agreement campaign, Unionist leaders sought a meeting with Mrs. Thatcher which was held on 25 February 1986. A joint statement issued after the talks said that the PM, while reaffirming the Government's commitment to the implementation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, made it clear that the Government would like to establish new arrangements for enabling Unionists to make their views known to the Government on affairs in Northern Ireland. She said that she would welcome discussion with the Unionist leaders of the form that such arrangements might take. The PM also offered consultations with the Unionist leaders about the future of the Northern Ireland Assembly and about arrangements for handling Northern Ireland business in Parliament at Westminster.

2. The PM agreed to consider positively a suggestion by Mr. Molyneaux and Dr. Paisley that the Government should call a round table conference to discuss devolution in Northern Ireland. She said that the Government would be willing to consider any system of devolution that would command widespread acceptance in Northern Ireland. Both sides were to reflect upon the various suggestions made. It was agreed to meet again shortly. It was understood that if after discussion with all concerned the ideas raised in the talks bore fruit that "we" should need to consider what that meant for the work of the Intergovernmental Conference.

3. Party Resolutions

The Unionist leaders returned to Belfast but were unable to convince their supporters that the strike planned for 3 March should be called off. A much harder line was adopted. Resolutions passed by each party on 28/2 (OUP)

and 6/3 (DUP) "insisted that arrangements for the Government of administration of Northern Ireland insofar as they differ from those applying in the rest of the United Kingdom must be agreed with the representatives of our people and called upon her Majesty's Government to abandon or suspend the Anglo-Irish Agreement pending discussions of their proposals". There was also a call for total integration with Britain or alternatively an agreement centred on devolution acceptable to the majority of the people of the Province, and the belief was stated that Mrs. Thatcher's objectives could in large measure be pursued in harmony with the majority community in Northern Ireland by way of a two-tier or two stage conference - the first between the Government and the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland to consider the Government's proposals for devolution and the second, dependent upon agreement on the first, between the Governments in London and Dublin and a newly constituted government of Northern Ireland to agree to a new British/Irish framework within which cooperation etc. could be developed within these islands.

4. On 7 March the Unionist leaders wrote to the Prime Minister enclosing the resolutions from their parties, saying that they could not enter into negotiations about structures of government for Northern Ireland within the Anglo-Irish Agreement. They expressed a willingness to assist in designing a different framework for talks and welcomed the Prime Minister's willingness to arrange discussions to see if such a framework could be established. They stated that it would be essential that during the period of negotiations the Agreement should not be implemented.

5. PM's Reply

The Prime Minister replied on 21 March 1986 saying that she was glad to hear that it remained the Unionist purpose to create a framework within which dialogue could take place and that, for her part, she would certainly wish to enter

into talks with the Unionists on any or all of the matters mentioned when last they met, including matters on which the Agreement has no bearing, such as improved arrangements for Unionists to put forward their views and proposals to Ministers and the handling of Northern Ireland business in Parliament. The text then laid down very clearly the position of the U.K. Government, rebutting points made in the resolutions about the nature of the Agreement and its impact on British sovereignty. The letter confirmed that the Government was ready to take part in a round table conference with the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland to consider proposals for devolution and to discuss with the Unionists how best to set it up as quickly as possible.

6. Formulae for Starting Talks

During March there was much flying of kites on the operation of the Agreement "sensitively" and of giving Round Table talks "priority". It was part of the document Catherwood supplied to Hume at their Strasbourg meeting with Paisley. In private several Unionists agreed that they did not expect to achieve the suspension of the Agreement. Mr. Millar, General Secretary of the OUP, thought the following formula would work: A letter from Mrs. Thatcher allowing a Paisley/Molyneaux/Thatcher meeting to take place, followed by a brief non-controversial communique. Behind the scenes intensive preparatory work on devolved government should take place so as to ensure success of formal talks. A statement should be made by the two Governments on round table talks on devolution containing a formula which would lead to suspension of the Conference for three months Round table talks would take place then on devolution.

7. Portadown March - Attacks on Police

The next most important event was the Portadown march on Easter Monday, which was banned by the RUC. A middle-of-the-night march took place led by Dr. Paisley. During the day further efforts to hold a banned march took place against strong police opposition which resulted in considerable rioting and marked the rapid escalation of attacks on police and on police homes.

8. Unionists' letter - no basis for talks

On 2 April a further letter was sent to Mrs. Thatcher. This letter rejected further talks saying that it was apparent there were profound differences in perceptions of the functions and purpose of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. No purpose would be served at this time by detailed discussions of the respective views. The PM's assertion that she is committed to and will not suspend the operation of the Agreement precluded the requisite degree of flexibility necessary in the circumstances. "We find no acknowledgement of the positive suggestions for a two-stage conference to discuss both devolved government and the future relationship of any devolved government with the governments of London and Dublin. We have difficulty in appreciating how a conference on devolved government, with the agreement still in operation, can be seen as other than conforming with the devolution provision in the Agreement itself. A conference on those terms would be nothing less than the acceptance of the Agreement.... We are, of course, anxious to find a way out of the present impasse, but the terms of your letter sadly reject consultation in favour of confrontation. We are still even at this stage anxious to hear your views on our proposals which remain unanswered."

9. Eames approach

In the following weeks several proposals were made indirectly by Unionists to the Irish Government to see if

there was a willingness to meet or establish talks. On 5 April 1986, Bishop Eames brought a message from Mr. Molyneux asking for his views of the situation. The Taoiseach's reply to Mr. Molyneux was that he recognised the desirability in principle of early political progress and that it would be important to not embark on any process unless both the British and Irish Governments were convinced the Unionist leadership involved could actually deliver; that both Governments would need to be satisfied that any opening given at this stage would not be taken as encouragement for the hardliners; in view of the dangers involved in any discussions, the outcome would need to be predetermined and in this connection the Taoiseach said it was necessary at a minimum to know that the Unionists would be prepared in a devolved Government to share executive power with the SDLP. These conditions would open the possibility for giving priority to devolution talks over the Conference meeting for a period of up to two months.

10. British Reaction

The message conveyed to Molyneux was related also to the British authorities who were worried that a difference might appear between their position and ours and a meeting between Molyneux and the Taoiseach was not pursued.

11. PM's second reply - the opening for talks about talks

On the 16 April Mrs. Thatcher wrote to Molyneux and Paisley saying "I welcome your wish to find a way out of the present impasse. You told me in your letter of March 7 that your purpose was to create a framework within which dialogue would take place. For our part I am ready to arrange discussions to try to see whether such a framework could be established. May I say how much I hope that it can, and that it will lead to a constructive dialogue". The Secretary of State made a number of phone calls on the 16th to say that the Prime Minister's letter did not

require that the first contact between the Unionist politicians and the British Government should take place at Prime Minister level and that it might be at political or official level. Paisley rang the Secretary of State and said that he was speaking for both Molyneaux and himself and that they would like a meeting with a high ranking civil servant to consider whether there is a framework to enable talks take place with the Prime Minister. Elliott's view, was that the Prime Minister would be wary of permitting a civil servant to indicate any flexibility and that if she were prepared to be flexible she would wish to indicate it herself to the Unionists. It was speculated that the obvious civil servant with the right accent was Bloomfield, who was missing from Northern Ireland in that week. At this stage, it was expected that the talks about talks would be very short, (1 week) to be followed by a meeting with the PM.

12. Joint Statement by Unionists

A joint statement issued by the Unionists on 16 April stated "we note the Prime Minister's recognition that an impasse exists, which results from the fact that consent for the Anglo-Irish Agreement simply does not exist". The rest of this statement was taken up with the details of their letter of March 7 and saying that they would be replying to Mrs. Thatcher and that in the meantime they would be making no further comment.

13. Taoiseach's Meeting with Unionists

On 18 April the Taoiseach met Mr. Carson and Mr. Redpath of the Unionist party and on 19 April had dinner with the Northern Consensus Group. Both of these groups pressed the merits of the "Northern Ireland Charter".

14. Request for further Conference Meeting

On the 18 April we had already conveyed to Belfast our views that the interval concept should not be taken up until after another meeting of the Conference.

15. On 22 April it was indicated that Mr. King was not willing to make a decision on our request for an early meeting of the Conference until he received a reply to Mrs. Thatcher from Molyneaux and Paisley. Counsels on the British side in Belfast were divided on the request and it was understood that the British saw talks about talks to be undertaken by Bloomfield as leading ideally to talks between the parties involved and the British Government. It was not expected that much would come out of the talks about talks.

16. Unionist Reply to PM's letter: new 12-point plan

On 23 April the Unionist leaders replied to Mrs. Thatcher's letter of the 16 April saying "your aim to establish discussions for establishing a basis for future dialogue is appreciated. We are conscious that a clear understanding of our respective positions is necessary if such discussions are not themselves to prove abortive and therefore prejudicial to any future progress. We have already made known to you the parameters of any future dialogue as set out in the resolution attached to our letter to you dated March 7. We enclose for the record the statement which was issued on receipt of your letter of April 16. Perhaps through the usual channels we could reach agreement about a first meeting". On the same day the Unionist leaders launched a new 12-point plan of opposition to the Agreement (attached).

17. Radio Ulster Interview

On 24 April 1986 the Unionist leaders Paisley and Molyneaux were interviewed on Radio Ulster followed by an interview

by King in which an outline was given of preliminary talks to be undertaken with civil servants from the NIO office but not making clear who would represent the Unionist parties. The objective of the preliminary talks was to establish whether a framework exists for more substantive talks. The said that the framework must be outside the Agreement that the working of the Agreement must be held up and must be formally announced to be so during substantive talks but not necessarily during the preliminary talks.

18. Preliminary Contacts

On the 25 April Belfast reported that tentative exploratory talks had begun that day and it was likely that both Andrew and Bloomfield would begin preliminary talks the following week which would go on for some weeks.

19. As indicated in the Background note, the talks have not yet gone ahead.

Anglo-Irish Section
6 May 1986.

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