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Personal and Secret

Conversation with Sir Frederick Catherwood, M.E.P.,
Iveagh House, 13 October 1986

1. Sir Frederick had telephoned the Taoiseach's office last week to request a meeting with the Taoiseach who decided not to see him but arranged to have him seen by the undersigned and A/Sec Ó Tuathail. We met him at Iveagh House for about 1½ hours. Sir Frederick explained that he had wished to see the Taoiseach to follow up the contact he had had with him last January but he understood the busy schedule of the Taoiseach. He wanted to let us know what he was doing. His recent initiative had come unstuck either because Paisley had not been able to persuade Molyneaux to go along with it in the end or because the British Cabinet Secretary had wished to 'face down' the unionists. He was not sure which. He referred to the insensitive British Government statement (contained in Mr. King's Oxford speech) which responded to the recent Catherwood initiative by referring back to the February Thatcher-Paisley/Molyneaux talks. That was equivalent to reminding the Taoiseach of the Chequers 'out, out, out' press conference.
2. Sir Frederick said that long before the Anglo-Irish Agreement had been signed both Paisley and Molyneaux had talked to him about the need for unblocking the situation in Northern Ireland and for North-South links. Unionists realised that they were only 2% of the UK and 20% of all Ireland. It had been a mistake that the British Government had not consulted with the unionists during the negotiation of the Agreement. Molyneaux had complained to him at one stage during the negotiations that even his traditional, normal contacts with the Prime Minister and others in Government had been cut off. Sir Frederick had gone to the Prime Minister to seek to re-establish those contacts for Molyneaux but she had simply referred him to Douglas Hurd who was adamant about keeping the negotiations to himself.
3. Sir Frederick said that what was needed was to tilt the playing field back in the direction of the unionists. It was now tilted away from them. The question of balance was all important. At the same time he admitted that nationalist gains from the Agreement could not be compromised. The Agreement contained for the first time an Irish dimension together with an impetus for devolved Government. This was very useful. When the devolved Assembly came into being then there was provision for direct links between the two Governments North and South. This was the line of his thinking. Unionists were genuine in their desire to proceed towards devolution but they wondered if the SDLP was.

4. Sir Frederick said that he felt it necessary to try again to get talks going not least because such activity might help to keep the initiative away from the men of violence. Obviously the formula of last month would not work a second time. He was working on a new formula. This would be in the form of a declaration by the two Governments. It would begin from the premise that both Governments wanted devolution. Both Governments held that when an Assembly with a devolved Government came into place that Assembly would have direct links with the South and certain functions of the Intergovernmental Conference would go over to the Assembly. Simultaneously the Secretariat would lose certain of its functions. He handed over a rough draft containing these ideas but emphasised that it was incomplete, especially in relation to the Secretariat. He had spoken to Paisley and Molyneux last Thursday and was in touch with Ken Bloomfield. He had also seen Tom King at the Conservative Party conference but he thought it would be necessary to see King again as when he had seen him he did not think he had succeeded in getting anything through to him. King needed facts presented to him in a very simple way.

5. He felt it was necessary to move fast. If the window of opportunity between two Conferences could be grasped he felt there was sufficient time. He instanced the fact that when he had chaired the devolution talks in the Assembly last year, he had given the parties involved ten days to reach agreement and they had. As to the chairing of any Round Table talks, Paisley and Molyneux last February had wanted the Prime Minister to chair at least the initial meetings. This was because they felt that by so doing the British Government would give a serious commitment to pushing the talks through. That was why Paisley and Molyneux had been against talks about talks which represented no such commitment.

6. He thought that at the present stage if talks were to begin it might be acceptable if King were to start them off and then leave things to a neutral chairman like himself. His experience of the devolution talks had been that he could say things that no politician would ever get away with. Paisley understood that in such talks he would not get all he wanted, that the British Government would have to press compromise formulae on the leaders which the leaders could accept as not fully representing what they wanted but as inevitable if they were to get agreement. Sir Frederick was critical of Molyneux and the OUP. Molyneux was weak and, in effect, an absentee leader.

7. We explained to Sir Frederick the commitment of Ministers to devolution on the basis described in the Agreement, the willingness to be sensitive in the operation of the Agreement, the importance of a joint or co-ordinated British-Irish response to any initiative designed to achieve devolution and the absolute commitment of both governments to the Agreement and the maintenance of the Maryfield secretariat. The nature of the secretariat was explained as were the security co-operation aspects of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. We also referred to the earlier

Catherwood initiative pointing out that Paisley had seemed to have written off the formula well before Mr. King spoke out. It was agreed that Sir Frederick would keep in touch should he continue in his efforts to bring about inter-party talks.

Seán Donlon

Seán Donlon
Secretary
14 October 1986

cc. Taoiseach

Tánaiste

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Minister of Defence

Minister of Education

Minister of Health, Mr. O'Donnell, Russell

Minister of Agriculture

Minister of Labour