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SECRET

Northern Ireland

Meeting with Messrs Bloomfield and Quigley

Taoiseach

As arranged, Messrs Donlon, O Tuathail and I met Mr Ken Bloomfield, Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and Dr George Quigley, Secretary to the Department of Finance and Personnel, in Government Buildings today. The meeting lasted from approximately 11.45 a.m. to 2.45 p.m.

Essentially, the Northern visitors argued that the Anglo-Irish Agreement has now achieved the effect of breaking old moulds in Northern Ireland and that the process of dialogue there, within the new framework, has already begun. The present opportunity could be used to intensify that dialogue, if a move were made by the two Governments to encourage it - without calling in question the intention to continue to implement the Agreement. The visitors argued that the time to seize this opportunity was now, or in the very near future. If a move was not made soon, then the opportunity could well be lost and constitutional politicians in Northern Ireland could gradually be pushed or eased aside.

For our part, we said that there was no commitment, at present, to anything other than implementation of the Agreement - "sensitively".

If there were to be movement, we would need the assurance that the interlocutors could deliver and that any changes would not encourage hardliners. We would be particularly concerned to ensure that both Governments moved in concert. There would be no question of suspending the Agreement and no question of a closure of the Secretariat, in which working groups were going ahead, anyway.

The following is a more detailed account of the meeting. Although it is given in direct speech, it does not purport to be verbatim.

Bloomfield:

The situation in the North is becoming more serious by the week. The petrol-bombing and attacks on police houses are particularly worrying. The effect on RUC morale has not begun to be damaging, as yet, but nobody can say when this may start to happen. Senior politicians like Lord Moyola and Brookeborough, who have retired from active

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politics, are, with others becoming more concerned daily. In fact, these two are seeking a meeting with the Prime Minister.

One alternative would be to look to a long campaign of violence and attrition - doing nothing and bringing home to the Unionists that this sort of action just does not pay. There may be arguments for this, which could be a completely logical line of action.

On the other hand, there are arguments now for discussions, which could bring constitutional politics back into the picture again.

Quigley:

What is needed are discussions on an adult plane. There is a window of opportunity now for genuine debate, if parties can be got off the hook. Constitutional politicians have not, so far, succeeded in controlling the situation.

Bloomfield:

There are indications now that they are ready for dialogue. Even Robinson seems to be making more dove-like noises than of late. Messrs West, Ardill, etc. have been in touch with me - acting more or less as stalking horses for Molyneaux. They may be representing their own views, or they may be representing his - he is a clever politician - but one way or the other they appear to be ready to contemplate some form of power sharing.

Nally:

But can they deliver? There is no point in discussion or dialogue or anything else with people whose power base has disappeared or is disappearing. To what extent is the DUP ready to follow along the constitutional road - or even a large majority of that party?

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Bloomfield:

There is the point that many in that Party are for devolution, as distinct from integration. Many Official Unionists are of the same mind. Molyneaux is not a fully convinced devolutionist. He is arguing that Northern Ireland should enjoy the same rights and be governed in exactly the same way as the rest of the United Kingdom i.e. that it does not need and should not be given separate institutions. This is one reason why it may be very difficult to deliver the OUP. Notwithstanding these difficulties, it is essential to do something now to restore the morale of the population. The ordinary man in the street and leaders of commerce and industry are becoming extremely worried about the way things are developing. I had Parker (of Harland and Wolff) for dinner in my house last night. He said that there would be no question but that the British order for ships would by now have been signed, sealed and delivered if things were normal. However, the British fear the instability in the North and this is giving rise to hesitancy in firming-up orders. This is only one instance of what is happening over a wider area.

Quigley:

A settlement is essential to get equilibrium. It could be argued that the Agreement has already achieved its purpose in that it has brought about a very considerable shift in unionism. The important thing now is to ensure that in this shift moderates are not submerged. There are many signs that important people in the Unionist parties recognise this danger. Frank Miller, who enjoys some prestige there, has spoken of the necessity for unpalatable decisions etc. The fundamental nature of these changes should not be underestimated. A real realignment was taking place in Northern Ireland politics.

Bloomfield/Quigley:

This may lead, eventually, to one group of Unionists going for devolution and another group, who, hopefully, would be small, going for independence. This latter group could, if all went well, form the official opposition, under a devolutionary arrangement, assuming that the framework for constitutional politics remained in Northern Ireland.

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Bloomfield:

Unionists are now beginning to realise that the choice facing them is whether to preserve the union or to preserve their ascendancy. People going for ascendancy may find themselves, logically, on the independence road - however untenable that might be economically and politically. The important thing now is timing. There are many arguments, the force of which I can see, for letting the present mood continue and for considering action only later in the year. However, if this course were followed, action could well be too late - in that constitutional politics would have become discredited.

Donlon:

There are many things in your analysis with which we agree. It could be, perhaps, that priority could be given to discussions on devolution but these would have to be on the firm understanding that the participants could deliver.

Bloomfield:

There is much to be said for encouraging dialogue within Northern Ireland among the political parties. This should not be stymied simply because the Prime Minister does not or cannot call a round table conference. Discussion between the main policy committee of the OUP and the SDLP should be encouraged.

Donlon:

I believe that a letter exists, which will be discussed by the SDLP next Saturday, which could give rise to this dialogue. I do not know the exact terms of the letter and am speaking only with second-hand knowledge of its contents.

Bloomfield:

Could the OUP policy group and some group from the SDLP engage in exploratory talks?

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Nally:

There would need to be arrangements for official or administrative support in these talks. Political parties who have for so long been away from the machinery of government, may not know how it works and certainly would find great difficulty in dealing with the practicalities.

Quigley:

Even if the two parties were to get together for discussions, there could be gain. The mere fact of talking together could be helpful.

Bloomfield:

But those talks could not go ahead if, at the same time, there were to be the sound of Mr Barry's helicopter landing in the next field - bringing him to a meeting of the Conference. The Unionists final position may be that the SDLP could not have both devolution and the Conference.

This point was explored more fully over lunch. The fact that to the extent that functions were devolved they would not be the concern of the Conference was stressed again. Both Bloomfield and Quigley said that there could, at some point, be an argument for not suspending or changing the Agreement but for a supplementary agreement to deal with questions arising from the devolution discussions. One such question which was bound to figure large, was that of responsibility for security - with or without devolution.

Continuing his earlier remarks, Mr Bloomfield said that to get dialogue going now it would be desirable to defer meetings of the Conference, to leave room for the dialogue, or give priority to the dialogue, or hold the Conference somewhere else than in Northern Ireland. He appreciated the difficulty that deferment, however it was described, could be subject to pressure for further deferment on the argument that the devolution talks were going ahead and were nearing success and that the Conference should not meet, at the appointed time, in order to give the talks further time to succeed. This was an argument which would have to be met in the beginning by a firm commitment to holding the Conference within whatever time was agreed.

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Quigley (resuming dialogue):

I am more pessimistic about what is required in order to get movement. How do we get Robinson into the dialogue? To me it seems that three elements are necessary -

- (1) a statement that the two Governments are satisfied that the Agreement has generated active political dialogue in Northern Ireland;
- (2) that to give impetus to this process, it is necessary to set a term for completion; and
- (3) that during that period there would be no meeting of the Conference.

It would have to be made clear that on this occasion the chips are down. For Unionists, and for Nationalists, this was the time for the grand settlement. There would have to be acceptance that if the dialogue does not reach agreement, then the Agreement is still there and continues fully in force.

Quigley:

This would at least deal with the Unionist criticism that they have had no opportunity to contribute to the Agreement process. Even if the gesture failed, it is hard to see that the position would be much worse than it is now. The Agreement would still be in place and would still be fully operable as between the two Governments.

Bloomfield:

Robinson in his statements yesterday seemed to be more amenable than previously. His reference to the obduracy of the Prime Minister as the only obstacle to progress was particularly noteworthy.

During the discussions the firm intention of the two Governments to stay together in implementing the Agreement was emphasised repeatedly. Mr Bloomfield said that neither he nor Quigley could say whether a gesture of the sort being discussed would, in fact, produce a favourable reaction from the Unionist parties. However the approaches which had been made to him and his knowledge of the situation led him to be mildly optimistic.

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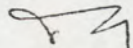
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During the lunch there was detailed discussion of forms of devolution. Bloomfield feels strongly that the Prior proposals i.e. the Secretary of State remaining in charge of finance and personnel with other functions distributed among other Ministers according to some pre-arranged formula, without necessarily the obligation of formal collegiality, would not work, essentially because it would enhance or intensify the attitude, which, according to him, has bedevilled politics in Northern Ireland i.e. that the politicians have not, in recent years, been totally in charge of anything constructive. They have become hooked on destructive rhetoric and criticism, without any, apparent, concern for the real issues like employment and the state of the economy. Unless whatever emerges in the form of the Executive is as completely responsible for all functions these tendencies will continue to make artificial or disrupt political life in Northern Ireland.

There was some discussion of the question of giving responsibility for security, at some time in the future, to a devolved administration. This discussion was, of its nature, inconclusive.

Finally, there were exchanges on the question of the British attitude to EEC money for the international fund and on the position about the American money.



9 April.

Copy to:

Tanaiste, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Minister for Justice, Attorney General, Ambassador Dorr and Messrs Ward, Donlon, O Tuathail, Russell and Lillis.