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Meeting with Northern Ireland Civil Service at Government
Buildings on the morning of 10 April, 1986

Northern Ireland side: Mr. Ken Bloomfield (Head Northern
Ireland Civil Service)
Mr. George Quigley (Permanent
Secretary Northern Ireland Department
of Finance and Personnel)

Irish side: Messrs. D. Nally, S. Donlon
and E. O Tuathail

This was a follow up meeting to the earlier meeting on 8
January. The meeting began a little after 11.30, continued
over lunch until the visitors left in accordance with their
travel arrangements after 15.00 hours. The meeting was
informal, relaxed and neither side took formal notes.

Bloomfield began by giving an analysis of the situation. The
earlier strategy had been based on an assessment that the
opposition to the Agreement might take an organised form, and
that at a much later stage political talks between the
political parties could begin. In fact, however, the
opposition had been fragmented, anarchic and sporadic; on the
other hand, movement towards dialogue was earlier than
expected. It was necessary to consider if a change in strategy
was necessary.

On the security side, the possibility of a sudden deterioration
has to be taken into account. Any bad incident - such as even
the death of Keith White, the young loyalist protester during
the Portadown events (who was seriously injured by plastic
bullets and is now alive only because he is on a life support
system) - could trigger off such a deterioration. Time was not

on the side of moderation. There was the march planned for Portadown by the Apprentice Boys at the beginning of May and there was the marching season in the period after that. At any time the limit might be passed ^{after which} when political dialogue ^{could be} was no longer possible.

Bloomfield referred to the various feelers that Unionist politicians had been putting out. There were the talks that were taking place that day between Lord Brookborough and Lord Moyala with Mrs. Thatcher in London. Basically, as he saw it, there was a choice either to dig in with the risk that the present openness to political dialogue would vanish (though eventually it might reappear in a different and stranger form) or enter now into a process of dialogue. Here the question of a formula arose and this obviously raised problems. *TL*

The previous strategy was to think in terms of 1974. There was good and bad in trying to continue with a strategy of holding firm until after the summer. It was always possible to govern but one had to ask about the quality of Government in a society where violence grew worse. The alternative was to seize the opportunity that moderate unionists were holding out. There were, of course, risks in doing so.

Bloomfield referred to the press reports the previous day about his discussion with Harry West. It was true that such discussions had taken place. West had asked Molyneaux if he ~~could~~ could take up at a political level the results of the dialogue ^{and Ardill} he had been having with the SDLP members (Caragher and O'Hanlon). Molyneaux had agreed, provided this did not break the unionist ban on contacts at political level. Contacts at civil service level were acceptable. West was convinced that 'power sharing' was now possible but it was necessary to find a formula that would restore to Unionists their 'self respect' (this phrase came up several times in Bloomfield's conversation). Bloomfield admitted that the Official Unionist Party suffered from schizophrenia about devolution - some being

strongly in favour of integration. This was a problem that the DUP did not have. Bloomfield emphasised the feeling among unionists in the business community that movement towards political action was needed. Mr. Chris Parker, Chairman of Harland and Wolf, had talked with him the previous evening on these lines.

Quigley said that the Agreement had shown that it was working by the way it had shaken up Unionists. Frank Millar's recent statements were a good indication of this. It was not noteworthy that while few a unionists had come out in support of Millar's statements, no-one had shown strong opposition either. A realignment was taking place. Instead of the old split between the hard and soft unionists, now what was happening was the beginning of a division between moderate unionists who genuinely wanted to maintain the union and those outside who were going in the direction of UDI. It was necessary to do business before the moderate element eroded. Quigley saw the emergence of a split between ^{the interests of the union} unionism and protestantism ^{in the U2-ist mind} ~~as motivating forces~~. Bloomfield saw a need to get the SDLP and the OUP to talk at political committee level. Sean Donlon mentioned the letter that the SDLP had received from the OUP. This would be discussed at the SDLP Council meeting on Saturday next. Bloomfield commented in Harry West's idea that talks about talks should be started between the parties at middle group level. Quigley commented that it would be best to keep the OUP and DUP together for as long as possible.

Bloomfield admitted that there was a risk in postponing meetings of the Conference for say six weeks, as just enough (but no more) progress could be ensured so as to justify a further extension of the postponement period with possible successions of postponement without real results. Bloomfield felt that this was a risk that had to be taken. Quigley proposed as a possible formula, a statement containing three elements:

- the need to be convinced that the unionist leaders could deliver;
- the need to ensure that any opening would not end up in encouraging hard liners;
- we must be sure in advance of the success of any public talks;
- the Secretariat at Maryfield must continue.

If these conditions were met, we could give priority to talks about devolution: the two Governments would act together.

After the formal meeting, the discussion brought out the following further points:

- suspicion on the unionist side that the British in London might not understand as well as we did what was taking place in Northern Ireland;
- the need for us to take the initiative with the British to let them know our views on the need to encourage political dialogue;
- the fact that Bloomfield/Quigley had no good links with the DUP.

The following topics were discussed in some detail:

Assembly

The Secretary of State was likely to take up the question of secretarial staff at the Assembly with Kilfedder. The Assembly, in fact, was no longer functioning as intended and on legal grounds these were reasons to wind it up. However, for political reasons, King was reluctant to do this.. In any event, the lifetime of the present Assembly ended in October when the elections were due though it might be possible to extend it. The most immediate problem was in regard to local government. There were two ways of tackling the problem of Belfast City Council, firstly, by instituting a formal enquiry

on the basis of the Council defaulting on its payments (but this method meant that the defaulting stage had first to be reached) or through Commissioners: these latter had flexible powers: they could go into a Council, tidy up the difficulties and then withdraw and they could work with councillors who wished to sit on the Councils.

Devolution

Bloomfield outlined his opposition on practical grounds to anything other than a Cabinet-type system. If Ministers did not sit together in council, how could they reach agreement on allocation of total Government resources and elaboration through give-and-take Departmental budgets. He said that the idea of leaving the Secretary of State with the job of allocating finance would end up in a you and we situation. Responsibility came when Ministers had to make hard decisions on matters such as finance. Similarly, this argument could be extended to security. If the devolved Government was responsible for security matters (or at least some), Ministers would identify with the law and order system. Otherwise it would be all too easy to blame the British Government whenever things happened in the security area that individual Ministers did not like. Bloomfield thought that whether talks about talks or public talks themselves took place, a great deal of help (e.g. in suggestion devolution models, solutions to difficulties etc.) would be needed by Government, if the talks were to get anywhere.

At the end of the meeting, it was agreed that the contact was a useful one and that a further such meeting would take place.