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MOS

~~Tadreach
To see M.
Parr's note re
10/11~~

cc. PST, A/Sec Gallagher
Secretary to the Government
Secretary of Justice
Ambassador O'Rourke
Joint Secretary O'Halligan

Discussion with Dr. Brian Mawhinney - 14 November, 1988

SEEN BY
TADISEACH

Dr. Brian Mawhinney M.P., Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office called to see me this morning before he met the Tánaiste (I had known him fairly well when I was in London some years ago). He was accompanied by Ambassador Fenn.

Dr. Mawhinney is in Dublin to address a Rotary Club Lunch. He was pleased at the idea that this may be the first occasion in living memory when a British Minister has made a speech to a Dublin audience (as distinct from a press conference etc.) A copy of his speech is attached.

Our discussion which lasted about half an hour dealt with what might be called "political" matters and did not touch at all on the education area which is Dr. Mawhinney's main responsibility. He spoke of the importance the British side attach to Article 1 (Status) and 4 (Devolution) of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the relationship between them. He said there were some signs of movement among Unionists at levels below the top echelon of leadership which it would be desirable to encourage and he said that the British side hope that the Irish Government will give more positive encouragement to the SDLP, over whom they have considerable influence, to engage in talks.

I noted that the Irish Government have accepted the Agreement of which Article 4 is a part but that Article 4 itself is explicit in saying "both Governments recognise that devolution can be achieved only with the cooperation of constitutional representatives within Northern Ireland of both traditions there". The Government see no evidence of this; and it is true to that extent to say that they have been sceptical - though they have not expressed any negative attitude to Article 4. However it does seem to us that the British side over estimate the influence the Irish Government exercise over the SDLP on this particular issue which is, of its nature, a question of relations

between the parties in Northern Ireland. I also said that I thought that objectively one could say the main obstacles to devolution were

- (a) the Unionist refusal to get into talks on their attitude to the Agreement;
- (b) the long-standing problem about Unionist attitudes to power-sharing; and
- (c) the fact that any devolved structure which might be set up would have to be sufficiently strong and well founded to withstand a new onslaught by the IRA.

Granted these major problems it would seem to us that the British side greatly overestimate the importance of any influence the admittedly sceptical attitude in Dublin about devolution may be exerting on the SDLP.

Dr. Mawhinney said that the three points I mentioned had always been there. However he did think that the attitude of the Irish Government could be quite important. In using the phrase "to or towards devolution" the British side had hoped to state their aim broadly enough to allow the Unionists to take part in discussions.

I referred to the Taoiseach's expressed wish for a wider dialogue with the Unionists and argued that, granted all that had happened, it was clear that there are two major forces on this island, Unionism and Nationalism. If they could get into a serious dialogue to see what accommodation could be worked out between them then many things would become possible. Until they engage in that kind of dialogue it has become evident that lesser expedients may not get very far.

Dr. Mawhinney said he saw a certain interest in this point but he thought there would not be time in our discussion to pursue it in any greater depth. The British effort at the moment is directed to improving the situation and availing of any stirrings of movement among the Unionists.

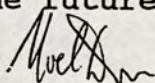
He went on to refer to Duisberg which he thought of as a fragile flower which should be encouraged to grow and not trampled on. I said that we had found it very difficult in piecing together the various accounts we had been given to know just what had been agreed if anything; and our main focus at present is to try to clarify this. I confirmed in response to his question that we have not yet been approached by Herr Speaker. Neither he said, have the British side. I said that one account we had received was that the formula envisaged at Duisberg was that one meeting of the Conference should fix a definite date for the next meeting thus allowing the interval to be used for any talks; in addition the Joint Secretaries on either side might find it possible "to be absent" at a crucial point. I said that if that is a correct account then I supposed that the "news interest" so to speak would be in the fact that the Unionists were now prepared to settle for this formula instead of demanding some kind of "suspension". He said that their understanding was that what had been worked out was more or less as I had said it and that it was now for each of the Duisberg participants to work on their party leadership. As to the "news interest" he thought that the formula also contained the important implication that if it were agreed then the SDLP would be ready to talk seriously in the interval between conferences.

As to the review, Mawhinney said that there had been a good deal of bad feeling because the press coverage after the meeting of the Conference at Stormont on 2 November seemed to suggest that the British side had had to be dragged "screaming and kicking"

into the idea of a substantive review. That was not the case. He said he had worked for Tom King for one and a half years as Parliamentary Private Secretary and now for three years as Minister and he had never seen him so angry as about the coverage in the Dublin papers and also because of a piece by Chris Ryder in the Daily Telegraph which seemed to be based on an inside knowledge of the documents. The British side certainly had not briefed Ryder and they could only conclude that we had.

I argued these points, noting that we had felt somewhat put out before the Conference when we read in the papers that Tom King had unilaterally asked for representations to be made to him on the review whereas we had always believed it should be a joint process. We had also felt that we had to argue at the Conference itself to get something substantive into the communique on the review. At the same time I did not like the idea of this kind of competitive briefing and jockeying for position which I did not think was good for either of us. Ambassador Fenn said that they had always wanted a review of substance. What had been at issue at the Conference was not whether or not the review should be substantive but simply how politic it would be to put a lot into the communique about it - as they saw it they had been worried that this might frighten off the Unionists.

At this stage we broke off discussion and I took Dr. Mawhinney and Ambassador Fenn to call on the Tanaiste. In private conversation, Dr. Mawhinney mentioned that he would be coming to Dublin for the American football match on 19 November and he hoped it might be possible to keep in contact either then or on some future occasion.


N. Dorr
Secretary

14 November, 1988