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Meeting with Mr. Denis Murray
Political Correspondent of B.B.C. Northern Ireland

*P.S. Taoiseach
Pages 1 and 2 are of
particular interest.
D.A. 14/11*

I met Denis Murray, political correspondent of BBC Northern Ireland in the course of a visit to Belfast on 3/4 March 1988. Murray said that he recently had a lengthy conversation with Peter Robinson, Deputy Leader of the DUP. Robinson told him that the last thing that Molyneaux and Paisley want at present is an offer of talks from Dublin. Murray quoted directly from the note of his conversation with Robinson which read "if the Taoiseach wants talks with the Unionist leadership, then there would be a major difficulty". Murray said that Robinson went on to explain that the difficulty would arise because of the very fragile nature of the Molyneaux/Paisley relationship. In Robinson's view, Paisley has serious reservations about talking to Dublin although he has publicly agreed with Molyneaux that there must be an Irish dimension if real political progress is to be made in the North.

Murray said that he had got a very strong impression from Robinson that, for his own political and private reasons, he would welcome an offer of talks from Dublin. He also gave Murray the impression that he was anxious to open up his own lines of communication with Dublin. He told Murray that talking to Dublin was "a much more fertile ground" in which to work than trying to seek any new approach in London. Robinson said that for Unionists the suspension of the Agreement and the maintenance of the Union were still crucial requirements for any formal dialogue. He said that it would be difficult for any Unionist politician in the present climate to maintain his political base if he departed from either of these basic realities. However, Robinson recognised that such requirements would in turn involve a radical readjustment of the kind that would seriously compromise the SDLP. Nonetheless, he

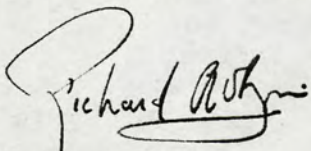
had noted John Hume's comment that Unionists should seriously consider talking directly to Dublin. Consequently, Robinson felt that a formula might be found which could enable Unionists to engage in talks with Dublin. While he recognised that the Irish Government could hardly agree to the suspension of the Agreement, he felt that a formula could be found which would enable talks to take place. He told Murray that such a basis might be an understanding that while the talks were underway the Conference would not meet and perhaps the head of the Irish side of the Anglo-Irish Secretariat in Belfast would be recalled to Dublin for consultations.

Murray said that he felt that he was being asked to pass this message back to Dublin. Murray's assessment is that Robinson is anxious to talk and to consider the prospects for an eventual meeting at Government level. Murray believes that Robinson perceives himself as the leader of the next generation of Ulster unionism. Murray is convinced that he is seriously tempted to be the "Brian Faulkner of tomorrow" while obviously avoiding the problems that Faulkner himself encountered by losing touch with his own constituency. He is also deeply irritated by the fact that the Task Force Report, to which he made a major contribution, was dismissed so peremptorily and in fact he feels that he was humiliated by both Molyneaux and Paisley. Murray believes that he still deeply resents this. Murray also believes that there is a close relationship between Robinson and McCusker. Murray speculated, although I did not comment on this, that McCusker has opened up lines of contact with Dublin. Murray said that McCusker had earlier in the week done a "very strong interview" on Ulster Television in the course of which he said that the Unionist leadership should not have ruled out talks with Dublin.

Murray's assessment is that there have been a number of dramatic developments in Northern politics since the conclusion of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Agreement was a serious blow to traditional unionism with the result that the Unionist community's relationship with Britain has now altered

fundamentally. He said that it was significant that nobody had contradicted Chris Ryder's report in the Sunday Times of some weeks ago that Unionists now accepted an Irish dimension and the fact that any future political arrangement in Northern Ireland would have to involve a relationship with Dublin in order to secure its future.

Murray also thought that it was significant that these developments in Unionism were coming into the open at the same moment when the political leadership of Sinn Fein was accepting that it could not attain its political objectives by violence alone. He also felt that it was significant that the Unionists had not "gone over the top" in commenting on the Hume/Adams talks. In addition, Murray said that Robinson left him in no doubt that the talks about talks between the Unionist leaders and the Secretary of State are going nowhere. The basic position of both Molyneaux and Paisley remains that as stated in their joint letter to the British Prime Minister of 28 August 1985 (copy of which is attached) that they are not prepared to share real power with the SDLP. Robinson left Murray with the strong impression that he was still having considerable difficulties with Paisley. However, he was determined that their difficulties should not be "played out" in public. Indeed, Robinson said that he felt that McCusker was damaging himself unnecessarily by being too critical in public of Molyneaux and Paisley. He felt that McCusker's criticisms of the leadership should be far more discreet particularly if he wants to take advantage of Molyneaux's inevitable departure and promote his case to succeed to the leadership of the OUP.



Richard O'Brien

Press Section

10th March 1988