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**Conversation with Dermot Nesbitt, 19 September 1996**

PST, PSS, S/S Ó hUiginn,  
Counsellors A-I, Section,  
Messrs Teahon, Donlon &  
Dalton, Ambassadors  
London & Washington, Joint  
Secretary

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1. Dermot Nesbitt, who is a UUP forum representative and prospective parliamentary candidate for South Down, is head of the Department of Accounting and Finance at Queen's University. He is also a member of the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights. He wrote the pamphlet Unionism Restated, which was published last November in conjunction with the UUP's revised Statement of Aims.
2. Nesbitt, who is in his mid-forties, was first involved in politics as a strong supporter of Brian Faulkner: he acted as his election agent in the 1973 Assembly election, and followed him into the Unionist Party of Northern Ireland following the collapse of the Sunningdale arrangements.
3. He was also, however, friendly with his harder-line QUB colleague Edgar Graham, the law lecturer and Assembly member who was murdered by the IRA on campus in December 1983. The two were actually in conversation (on the rival claims of devolution and integration) when Graham was killed; his last words, apparently, concerned Michael Mates and his support for devolution.
4. Nesbitt seemed delighted to meet me, never having previously, so he said, encountered a representative of the Irish Government (I had to inform him, however, that, contrary to his misapprehension, the Anglo-Irish Agreement had not obliged or entitled us to approve his appointment to SACHR). He was much more anxious to discuss substantive issues than the current manoeuvring at the talks. Our conversation was relatively brief, as he had another engagement, but we agreed to meet again before long. The points he made were orthodox and mainstream, but indicate the distance which exists between the thinking of even self-consciously moderate unionists and the expectations of nationalists.
5. Nesbitt remains firmly on the integrationist wing of the party. He argued that being treated on a par with the rest of the UK was much more in the long-term interests of Unionism than was devolution. Moreover, he would see little of substance for an

assembly with legislative powers to do, given the need to maintain parity of social provision for Northern Ireland, and the reluctance of the Treasury to concede, and of local politicians to use, revenue-raising powers. He agreed with me that his pamphlet, having firmly made the case against legislative devolution, concluded by fudging the issue. This was the result of internal disagreement within the UUP, and a realisation that the party had to remain open to emulating possible developments in Scotland.

6. Nesbitt argued that the improvement of North/South relations, which he wished to see, should be situated within a broader East/West arrangement. I granted that we were open to a further upgrading of the wider British/Irish relationship, but suggested that reasons of scale, and the greater intensity of interest, on both sides of the border, in practical cross-border co-operation, would mean that the main emphasis would fall on the North/South axis. In addition, the North/South relationship had, for nationalists, a clear and important political purpose.
7. While accepting this last point, Nesbitt said that this was precisely why unionists were so hostile and sceptical. He argued that if low-key and cross-community internal structures were established first, it would prove easy to agree improved North/South connections. I said that nationalists were frankly disinclined to believe this latter point, given past experience: moreover, they were evidently not disposed to accept a settlement which took as its starting point the primacy of internal arrangements.
8. Nesbitt then made the argument, a favourite of David Trimble's, that there exist no international precedents either for the Anglo-Irish Agreement or for what the Framework Document envisages but that, on the contrary, international law on minorities justifies the case for equal treatment within the UK. I in turn replied that international law sets floors of rights, not ceilings; that it is fast evolving; that there is a need to be creative in responding to the special requirements of our situation; and that in any case the two Governments, as sovereign, are entitled to reach agreements, whether novel or not, not in breach of international law.

9. Nesbitt went on to say that in his view the Irish Government had a pivotal role in reaching a settlement, by spelling out to nationalists the limits of what was realistically attainable, and by taking the lead in reassuring unionists that a united Ireland was not on the cards. A "courageous" Irish Government would unilaterally propose changes in Articles 2 and 3 as a gesture of good faith. On the contrary, we had tried to persuade Sinn Féin "that everything was on the table"; and the Framework Document raised the spectre of an embryonic all-Ireland government "dynamically" adding to its powers, with the fail-safe mechanism of compulsion if unionists did not co-operate. Moreover, what we had proposed would, while being totally unacceptable to unionists, never satisfy Sinn Féin.
10. In reply, I explained that we clearly did not expect that a united Ireland would emerge from these negotiations. As regards Sinn Fein, our calculation was that their move towards full engagement in democratic politics had to be encouraged as far as possible, without breaching basic principles. We had moved as far forward on Articles 2 and 3 as was politically feasible, and were firmly committed to action as part of an overall settlement; and the institutions we had proposed in the Framework Document would all have to operate by agreement only. As a parting shot, Nesbitt said that we were like a car salesman who, while assuring a customer that he would not have to buy a particular car if he didn't want it, nevertheless refused to produce a different model in response to the customer's clear rejection, and continued to extol the merits of that on display. I remarked that the analogy could work in more than one way.



Rory Montgomery

23 September 1996