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Reference Code: 2021/99/24

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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

(25)

5 November 1997

Handwritten note: ...

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

PSM: PSMS: PSSG:
Messrs. Murray, Teahon,
Mansergh & Dalton:
Ambassadors London &
Washington: Joint Secretary:
Counsellors A-I

Handwritten: by Mr Loughlin
Passed on to the Taoiseach
6-11-97

Dear Secretary,

Conversation with John Taylor

The Unionist MP John Taylor was my guest to lunch today, the latest of several meetings over the past two and a half years.

President McAleese

At the outset of our conversation, Taylor raised a glass "to President McAleese". He mentioned in confidence that he wrote to President elect McAleese on hearing of her nomination by Fianna Fail. This was a friendly letter, not a letter of support. Taylor appreciates very much that Ms. McAleese, in a professional way, refrained from making use of this correspondence when she was under pressure from the media about her contacts in the Unionist community.

Taylor expressed regret at the bitterness which has crept into the statements of some of his colleagues. He also regretted the "unhelpful" pressure which has been placed on Ms. McAleese over wearing a poppy. In the long run, however, Taylor expects the President to use her strong credentials with Nationalists to make important gestures towards Unionists.

Taylor gave a strong indication, without saying so in so many words, that if invited to the inauguration ceremony he will accept.

Articles Two and Three

Taylor gave me an account, from his own point of view, of yesterday's (Tuesday's) discussion in Strand Two. He suggested that the key trade-off in the negotiations is between North-South co-operation on the one hand and the removal of Articles Two and Three on the other. While

Unionists can support greater North-South co-operation, on European issues among others, they cannot do this with a government which is "dedicated to taking over Northern Ireland".

I said that our readiness to modify Articles Two and Three is set out in the Framework Document. It was therefore easy for me to acknowledge that constitutional change is an element in the settlement we want to see. It surprised me that Taylor saw Articles Two and Three as being the core of the negotiation from a Unionist point of view.

Meeting with the Taoiseach

Taylor, reiterating his position, referred to the contacts that have taken place about a possible bilateral meeting with the Irish government. He said that these contacts arose from a discussion between himself and Trimble. The basic objective is to enable the Unionist leadership to hear from the Irish government, if possible from the Taoiseach himself, how far we can go in amending Articles Two and Three. Once the UUP have an understanding, even a private understanding, of the scope for constitutional change, they will be in a position to judge (Taylor said) how far they can go in developing North-South co-operation.

The UUP accepts that it may be useful to hold a first meeting at official level to prepare an agenda for the main meeting.

The trade-off on Strand Two and the constitutional issues

I suggested that progress in mutual understanding between the UUP and the government would presumably require a number of subjects to be addressed simultaneously.

Taylor readily agreed and acknowledged that constitutional change in our jurisdiction could only happen in a referendum arising on the conclusion of the negotiations.

In the course of conversation, Taylor's position on Articles Two and Three seemed to oscillate between demanding their complete removal and demanding a reformulation under which the "constitutional imperative" (he referred to the McGimpseys' case) would disappear.

On Strand Two, Taylor initially asserted that no executive powers could be exercised by a North-South body.

I wondered aloud whether the Foyle Fisheries Commission could be said to exercise executive powers. I also wondered whether the implementation North and South of the border of an agreed road-scheme, to give a simple example, might not also involve the executive arm of government on each side of the border. I doubted the wisdom of a Unionist stand of principle on a particular word.

Taylor accepted that in some senses, North-South or cross border institutions would have executive powers. As we explored this idea further, he said that "an issue which it would be worthwhile for Dublin to explore" is whether the language we propose for North-South co-operation, including the exercise of executive responsibility, might also be applicable to East-West co-operation. Taylor intimated, without saying so directly, that if North-South and East-

West co-operation can be seen as falling into the same broad categories. the Unionists may find it easier to be flexible on North-South issues. (My impression is that Taylor was accepting that the North-South dimension will be weightier and more significant than the East-West dimension.)

I referred to Trimble's party conference speech which seemed to acknowledge that co-operation in the island of Ireland is not only of practical benefit but can "validate the Nationalist identity" - a new formulation which we found helpful and imaginative.

Taylor responded, only half jokingly, that because of his recent illness and absence from the party conference, he was not quite up to speed with Trimble's thinking.

The talks process

Taylor said that he is currently somewhat pessimistic about the talks process. That was also David Trimble's mood when they met yesterday morning. The UUP feel that the SDLP, and John Hume in particular, have had little to say in bilateral contacts and that in the negotiations themselves, the SDLP remain fearful of making a poor impression on the Sinn Fein representatives. The fear on the Unionist side is that Nationalists may calculate that an impasse in the talks will ultimately work to Nationalist advantage because of the likely reaction of the British government.

Before I could respond to this, Taylor added that he is fully aware that Nationalists may have the opposite perception, namely that Unionists are holding back.

I assured Taylor that the Irish government, and I thought the other Nationalist participants, are most anxious to make political progress.

Opinion in the Unionist community

I asked Taylor about Unionist public opinion. Taylor said that opinion in his own constituency is firmly behind the policy of participating in the talks. Occasionally he receives alarmist messages - most recently from a party official in Newry-Armagh. In general, Taylor did not betray any notable level of anxiety about the current state of feeling among Unionists.

The IRA and Sinn Fein

Taylor feels that the IRA ceasefire is holding well, although he is worried that the use of semtex in recent incidents may imply that individuals in the IRA are co-operating with the CAC.

Taylor expressed regret that the Unionist party line requires him to avoid conversation, and even eye contact, with Sinn Fein representatives in the talks. Sinn Fein people have saluted him in the corridors and have wished him well following his recent kidney infection. It goes against the grain not to be able to respond to these overtures.

Taylor said that his jocular tone in the negotiations, for example his description of the British shops on Grafton Street, is intended to lighten the atmosphere. He feels that Adams understands this and that an interview given by Adams on Radio Ulster yesterday, stating that "John Taylor doesn't believe what he says", was intended as a response to interventions by Taylor in Strand Two. Taylor feels that in this way he has established a kind of communication with Adams.

Taylor went on to say that Adams strikes him as very intelligent, and with a sense of humour. If the ceasefire holds, it may prove possible later on for the Unionists to deal directly with Sinn Fein. Taylor would look forward to getting to know Adams. He is less trustful of some of Adams' colleagues.

I described my conversation with Gusty Spence at a social event at the Labour Party conference. I recalled that Spence's father had been in the group of soldiers which fired a volley over the grave of William Redmond and that this family tradition was an influence on Spence.

Taylor said that the UVF has played a positive part within Unionism and that perhaps Sinn Fein is capable of playing an analogous part in advocating realism among Nationalists.

EMU

Taylor brought up the subject of EMU, arguing that our decision to participate in the single currency has been taken on "Nationalist" grounds and may prove an obstacle to North-South co-operation.

I said that any observer of the London political scene should find it easy to accept that on European issues political and economic considerations can converge. Gordon Brown's recent statement of policy, making it more likely than ever that Britain will become part of EMU, confirms the wisdom of the Irish government's position.

Taylor did not pursue the issue.

Conclusion

Taylor's general disposition is summed up for me in one of his remarks, namely that we need a settlement in which neither Nationalists or Unionists can claim victory. But the precise content of the accommodation he has in mind, involving Articles Two and Three and North-South cooperation, was considerably less encouraging than the "body language".

Although Taylor made it clear that he is in regular contact with Trimble, I formed the impression that unlike, say, Reg Empey, Taylor sees himself as an important political player in his own right.

I have reported before on Taylor's habit in conversation of offering warm praise of certain individuals. On this occasion he singled out for this treatment the Taoiseach, Gerry Adams, and (more than once) yourself.

Yours sincerely,

Philip McDonagh

Philip McDonagh
Counsellor