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SECRET

12 February 1986

THORSECK
MINISTER
SECRETARY
Mr. Neilly
A-1 SECTION
Mr. Lillis.

INFORMAL DINNER MEETING OF MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND NI SEC OF STATE KING - LONDON, 12 FEBRUARY 1986

The dinner (at the Admiralty Building in Whitehall) was confined to the two Ministers. Mr. Barry arrived at about 7.45 and left at 10.45 pm. I came to collect him at 10 pm and was present for the last half hour of the discussion. The following are notes based on this part of the discussion and on general comments by the Minister afterwards in the car on the way to the airport.

GENERAL

The dinner was fairly relaxed so long as the two Ministers were alone and our Minister felt that it went reasonably well. However it was noticeable that during the last half hour while I was present, King, though still quite friendly to both of us, tended to adopt the kind of "lecturing" tone he adopts at meetings. This made it harder to get anything across to him at that stage. He had just looked before dinner at a recording of last Monday's BBC "Panorama" programme about the dangerous mood of Unionists, the "Ulster Clubs" etc. and he stressed to us that there is a "tinder-box situation" at present. (The Minister suggested to me afterwards that this change of tone seemed to be occasioned by the presence of a third person as "audience" and I agree with this).

MINISTERS' COMMENTS ON DINNER

In the private discussion King did not repeat the serious criticisms of security cooperation which had been made (and then apologised for), in exchanges within the Secretariat within the past few days. (He did refer rather dismissively later in my presence to the "four detective inspectors" and the "fourteen additional chaps along the border in Donegal" (the Task Force ?) as part of his argument that the only real thing in the Agreement for the Unionists is the Convention).

King referred to the present problems on local Councils in NI. He seems to be considering appointing Commissioners who will strike a rate, as required, and could then step aside again and let the elected members back to continue other business.

He is considering what to do about the Assembly. He seemed worried that Paisley and others might try to set up their own "Assembly".

King did not, at any point, mention the question of a Parliamentary "tier".

DISCUSSION IN MY PRESENCE

He is very concerned about the Unionist objections to the "secrecy" of the proceedings of the Conference and sees the need for a communique of some

Substance from tomorrow's (and other) meetings to answer this. He did not seem willing to give much weight to the counter argument that going into any kind of substance in a communique at present can also be counter-productive for relations with the Unionists since they will use this as ammunition to attack any steps subsequently taken by him as due to Dublin's interference.

King said that the nationalist side had had a triumph in the agreement and in the election of Seamus Mallen; and he argued for the need to "give" something at this stage. He placed great stress on the question of the signature of the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism; and the need to announce a date. He described this as "the only thing in it" for the Unionists and did not seem to take aboard the Minister's arguments to the contrary. (The Minister referred to improved security cooperation etc. and also to the need to "get it right" in regard to the Convention since it would be counter-productive to evoke a legal challenge now in the Courts)

King said that the leadership on the Unionist side is very poor. The middle classes have opted out and their frustration is increased by the comparison they see between their own poor leadership and Hume on the nationalist side. King is critical (in a long-suffering way) of the fact that Hume has been in the Philippines monitoring the elections there when he should be at home in NI. His general tone towards Hume seemed to be one of regard for his stature as a politician (in comparison to Unionists) but with emphasis on the need for him to try to reach out to Unionists. He referred to a meeting at one time between the Harland and Wolf shop stewards and the three Euro-MPs from NI. The shop stewards, according to the account he had heard, were dismissive of Taylor, had somewhat better regard for Paisley and really thought Hume, when they had heard him, was the kind of person they wanted. More of that is needed. (He was not aware, until the MFA mentioned it, that Hume had arranged for the shop stewards to go to Dublin to meet the previous Taoiseach at one point).

In referring to the gathering dangers of a Unionist backlash (he did not use the word), King spoke of a recent beginning of sectarian killing. He said, in confidence, that they thought now that they have "got" the people concerned who are from the UVF. He had just signed extension orders for their further detention.

At a late stage, shortly before the Minister left, King raised - for the first time all evening - the idea of postponing the next meeting of the Conference. He professed to be extremely nervous of the meeting between Mrs. Thatcher and Paisley and Molyneaux now set for 25 February; and he felt everything must be done to avert a walk-out. When we said that Paisley could easily stage a walkout anyway if he wanted to, King agreed. The key thing however is whether Molyneaux will join him. If so he fears

real trouble.

Because of this meeting ahead he was concerned about seeming to force the pace now with meetings of the Conference. Tomorrow's meeting between the Minister for Justice, himself and the two AGs would be seen (rightly or not) as a meeting of the Conference; and he did not like the idea of this being followed by a meeting of the Conference proper next week. (He seemed to have a (wrong ?) idea that 17/18 February is still being talked about as a date).

The MFA argued that a meeting between the M/Justice and King (and the two AGs) should surely be seen as a kind of "plus" by the Unionists and not something negative. King would not agree. He said that the meeting would deal with "administration of justice" issues also and would not be seen as a "security" meeting (of the kind which might be presumed to appeal to Unionists). (Then, and at other points in discussion, he also slipped away from the argument when necessary by saying "of course you and I see that but rightly or wrongly this is how it is seen by the Unionists").

COMMENT

The part of the discussion for which I was present reinforced my general impression of King as bluff, well-meaning and not very clever or sensitive politically - either in the larger sense or in his ability to listen in order to feel out the position of the other party in such a discussion. He confirmed several times to the Minister that he will uphold the Agreement but he is plainly deeply influenced by the present very negative Unionist reactions. He takes these at face value and does not seem to have the political judgment to look carefully at the expected bluster to judge how far it is bluster and how far it is a serious threat. As a result he is "running scared" in relation to the Agreement and the Unionist reaction to it although he is committed to upholding it.

Nevertheless, the dinner has probably achieved something of its intended purpose from our Minister's viewpoint since the two Ministers spent two hours alone at table in a reasonably good atmosphere and this should help towards building up an improved personal relationship.



ND
12 February 1986