



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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ROINN AN TAOISIGH

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To: Secretary to the Government
From: W. Kirwan, Assistant Secretary

SECRET

Attempts to break the stalemate re inter-party talks on
devolution in Northern Ireland

1. Please see Mr. McCarthy's note beneath entitled "After Catherwood - what next". He and I may not be completely up with the play in a fast-moving scene but you may wish to take account of his views and of those I set out below in considering follow-up to your exchanges with Messrs. Andrew and Bloomfield in Belfast last week.

2. I believe that there may be the germ of a useful idea in what Mr. McCarthy says and I suggest below some modifications of it but I am doubtful that the present is a good time to pursue the matter. This is primarily for the reasons raised by you and Mr. Donlon in Belfast. My own impressions from the Oxford Conference of the British-Irish Association last month was that (1) the unionists have no agreed agenda or policy in regard to devolution and (2) they are likely to defer serious attempts to work out a negotiating position until after the elections widely expected in Ireland and the UK within the next 9 months; ^{by} observations and contacts in Oxford and analysis of developments in the North also led to the following conclusions:

- (1) there is a substantial group of unionists in the business world and elsewhere who may be prepared, sooner or later, to acquiesce in the Agreement but, despite one or two hopeful signals from the likes of Raymond Ferguson, there is little evidence that any such readiness will find political expression in any near future;

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- (2) among the unionist political parties and the more politicised ordinary unionists, there is still very strong rejection of the Agreement with particular reference to "Dublin interference in the government of Northern Ireland" and it is difficult to have any optimism about this abating in the medium-term;
- (3) there is little respect now, on the unionist side, for the SDLP and little or no disposition to do a power-sharing deal with them that might be acceptable to nationalists;
- (4) despite some impatience about delivery of reforms, there is continued widespread support for the agreement among Northern nationalists, with a considerable revival of morale among the SDLP, as a party: much of the satisfaction is attributable to the perceived role of the Conference and of the secretariat, including its location in Belfast.

3. My feeling then would be to stick out the stalemate and proceed with firm, steady but sensitive implementation of the Agreement, with no great optimism about the unionists coming round but in the hope that eventually enough of them will see that reform to meet nationalist concerns can be implemented without any injury to their concrete interests or legitimate rights and entitlements. If I had a doubt about this, it related to the danger that the flurry of sectarian assassinations some weeks ago would spark off a spiral of violence, with the paramilitaries taking centre stage from the politics, however moribund at local level in the North. At Oxford, David McKittrick, who has good sources on these matters, said that the North Belfast killings were entirely due to a maverick group of the UVF led by the late John Bingham and that neither the mainline

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UVF or UDA had yet decided to "go on the warpath". This assessment appears to have been borne out by events - or the lack of them - since then. Thus, while I understand and sympathise with the concerns expressed by Mr. Bloomfield about a deterioration in the situation, as economic life in the North continues to be hit by the uncertain atmosphere stemming from unionist objections to the Agreement, I believe that an initiative now would almost certainly be premature and doomed to fail. It is probably better to hold over any gestures to meet unionist concerns until they are more ready to talk meaningfully and more able to present agreed proposals and to deliver on them.

4. However, we need to keep close watch for any significant shift of the initiative among unionists towards the paramilitaries and to be ready to take or join in sensible steps to head off any developing shift of this kind. It is also in our interest vis-a-vis the British Government and public opinion in Britain to appear open to any moves towards talks on devolution that these "audiences" may perceive as serious or worthy. We should not, however, take or agree to steps that would be seen by nationalists and by unionists alike as a victory for unionist intransigence or as a setback to the efforts to put Northern nationalists on a footing of equality. Removal of the Secretariat from Maryfield, even temporarily, should, I believe, be ruled out by reference to these criteria.

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5. Subject to all that is said above, I would suggest the following adaptation of Mr. McCarthy's suggested formula, for use at an appropriate time:

- (1) an indication that the next ordinary Ministerial meeting of the Conference would take place at a time (not an exact date), either 2 or 2½ months from the date of the announcement [I doubt if any reference to official-level meetings would be required];
- (2) an indication that the settlement of the Agenda and preparation of the papers for the Conference meeting by the Secretariat will commence two weeks in advance of the meeting [I would not go so far as to say "the Secretariat's role under the Agreement" which could risk a strong adverse reaction among nationalists];
- (3) an indication that the Governments reserve the possibility of holding a special meeting of the Conference, should unforeseen circumstances e.g. in the security situation, require it;
- (4) a recital of the content of paragraph 4 (b) of the Agreement but without referring to the Article;
- (5) an indication that both Governments would welcome the early initiation of talks about devolved government for Northern Ireland [it seems preferable not to say explicitly "in the interval between Conference meetings"];
- (6) a recital that agreement on a devolved administration established on a basis which would secure widespread acceptance throughout the community and the assumption of devolved functions by that administration would mean that these functions would no longer come within the purview of the Conference and that, in that event, the working of the Conference would be reviewed by the two Governments, in relation to the scope and nature of its activities.

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There appears to be no need to reiterate in such a statement that there is no question of suspending the Agreement or the operation of various arrangements (or specifically the Conference and/or Secretariat) set up under the Agreement: it might help to get the talks going not to say this in a public statement.

6. As indicated, my own belief is that a statement on *these* lines - which is the furthest the Government should go, at least in present circumstances - would be unlikely to bring the unionists to the table for talks at which they could put forward acceptable proposals on which they could deliver. While we might gain short-term tactical advantage from bringing this reality into the open, I remain of the view that unless circumstances change, we should not spontaneously join in any such statement now but hold it over until it could hope to have practical effect in advancing the prospect of devolution: we could perhaps, in the interval, negotiate with the British on the wording of a statement for use at such a time.

Inkivine

14 October, 1986.