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Meeting with Tom King, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland  
at House of Commons, Thursday, 17 July 1986

1. The meeting which was fixed for 4 pm in Mr King's room in the House of Commons lasted about half an hour (the suggestion/request that I call on King had been conveyed to me yesterday through Nick Scott who as it happened also had lunch with me at the Embassy today). Nick Scott was with King at the meeting as was King's Private Secretary (Ward) who took notes.
2. Immediately before meeting King, I had had a discussion at the Foreign Office with David Goodall on another matter (approaches in European capitals about the Fund). As he saw me out Goodall repeated what he had told me earlier in the day in a phone call - that at a breakfast meeting between Howe and King this morning at which he (Goodall) had been present King had been anxious to de-escalate the present difficulties. (Goodall had also emphasised however that there was a considerable degree of uncomprehending exasperation at recent Irish statements on the part of the Prime Minister who is under pressure on other issues (sanctions etc). He thought that Geoffrey Smyth's column in The Times this morning which concludes pessimistically that the Agreement may be dead, probably reflects the flavour of some Downing Street briefers - which he very much deplored).
3. At our meeting King did indeed take the line of trying to de-escalate the crisis. At the same time he put his own perceptions of the weekend's events and their aftermath in his usual firm tone. In general however the point of the meeting seemed to be, as he said, to use various channels - the Ambassadorial as well as the Secretariat - to get things back on the rails again. I did not have the sense that I was being summoned to be admonished but rather that I was being enlisted in a general effort to restore good working relations.
4. King's basic view of the events of the weekend is that the period around 12 July could have been foreseen as the time of greatest test for the Agreement. The Unionists might try on the streets to make good their promise to "make Northern Ireland ungovernable". But this had not happened. Instead, as he put it "Paisley had been seen off"; and in this and in other ways the Agreement had survived its most testing time. He had hoped that Dublin would see it this way and would be pleased rather than dismayed by what had happened. For example, the Paisley "take-over" of Hillsborough was not what it appeared on the surface - Paisley's followers had tried first to "take-over" Dungannon, then Portadown (?) and then Lisburn but they had been "seen off" at each point by the security forces (the UDR at Lisburn?). So they had made their pathetic gesture at Hillsborough.
5. Similarly, the march on Garvaghy Road had been small and limited (though two extra lodges beyond what had been agreed, joined in); and they had sung hymns. Instead of a triumph for the Unionists the events of the weekend had been a failure.

Taoiseach  
Tánaiste  
Minister  
Minister for Justice  
Attorney General

Secretary  
Mr Nally  
Mr Ward  
Mr Russell  
A-I Section  
A-I Secretariat

6. Against this background he had been taken aback by the statement of the Minister for Foreign Affairs on Tuesday evening (15 July). He had been meeting with John Hume that evening (?) and Hume had given him to understand that Dublin had agreed that there would be no statement. Also he mentioned that Cushman on a visit to Dublin over the weekend had understood that no statement would be issued. Accordingly he (King) had been very surprised when Andy Wood of the NIO Press Office had called him about 10.30 pm to tell him that a statement had been issued. He had had to make his own position clear subsequently - as he did. But he and other NIO Ministers had resisted all requests to give interviews subsequently - even though he had been pressed by journalists on the basis that Mr Barry was giving interviews.

7. King also said that he felt that Dublin never really fully absorbs the point of the divided responsibilities in the British system between the Chief Constable and himself. He hoped that I (knowing the way the British system worked here) would continue to remind Dublin of this point which they say they see but which they tend to forget about again. Of course he could if he were dissatisfied entirely with the Chief Constable assert his powers and get rid of him (?). (I intervened to say that as Secretary of State he could also act to ban a parade - but he said that in doing this he would be acting on the advice of the Chief Constable).

8. In discussion I mentioned the point that our Minister in his interviews had paid tribute to the RUC on the ground who had had a difficult task but that his criticism had been focussed on the decision. King thought that the Minister had actually criticised the Chief Constable as such.

9. Having listened to King at some length I said of course that I would report his views faithfully. At the same time I wanted to convey Dublin's view - very strongly held - to him as faithfully as possible. I then went on to make the main points conveyed to me this morning on the phone by the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and also by telex by Mr O'Donovan.

10. I emphasised particularly that he would fail to understand the exasperation felt on the Dublin side if he focused only on particular events. These had to be seen against the background of a whole series of developments over many months since the Agreement which had been a joint effort animated by a common understanding of the two Governments expressed among other things in the carefully constructed question and answer paper. Dublin and our Minister as Co-Chairman had shown great restraint and forbearance over the months and had tried not to make things more difficult for him. The effect of this however over time had been to raise various public questions and to allow some erosion of our position. Just as he (King) saw the weekend of the 12th as a testing time for the Agreement in one sense so did his Co-Chairman see it as a test of the Agreement in another sense since his nationalist constituency in Northern Ireland and indeed in the South, seeing what they regarded as a net disimprovement in the position in Portadown as compared with 1985 were now asking very critically what was the point of the Conference and what if any the role of Mr Barry as Co-Chairman?

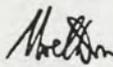
11. Even in face of this rising criticism on the part of a constituency which it had been our main aim to win over to support of the Agreement, our Minister had stayed his hand and had refrained from issuing any statement until the weekend was well over. But, as I hoped he would see, the key to understanding the exasperation in Dublin was not so much any particular aspect of the events at the weekend - although we had expressed our views on those - as the strong feeling that those events taken together with various statements made around that time and seen against the background of many months to which I had referred had all caused major political difficulties for our side in relation to the Agreement which had to be answered by a statement. In other words it was primarily the position of the Conference itself and the role of the Co-Chairman that the Minister wanted to assert in making his statement.

12. The foregoing may perhaps give the impression of an exchange which was very robust as to tone. This would not really be correct. King and I obviously each stated our respective positions firmly but the aim of the discussion was to explain why there had been a certain exasperation on each side and to help to defuse and de-escalate it as much as possible. Granted his style on other occasions, I felt that King was being, by his standards, subdued and restrained, and trying to patch things up.

13. I touched on the possibility of an early meeting - saying however that this was more properly handled through the Secretariat channels. King saw some difficulties about an early meeting but he did not seem to disagree when I said that even an outsider would feel that a meeting before the August holiday break (a term he questioned!) would be desirable to get things back on the rails. I said that our aim was to get things back into the Conference channel and get the Conference working as it should. We hoped that the damage which we perceived, could be restored by early progress on the package of issues in the Hillsborough Communique on which a good deal of work has been done - even if it might not be realistic to announce anything at just this juncture, it would be desirable for the Conference to be seen to get back to address them.

14. The foregoing is dictated in haste but is, I think, a fair account of the general tone of the meeting. I will be seeing King again tonight at a small dinner organised by the British/Irish Association for fund-raising purposes.

15. As I was leaving Nick Scott promised to get me something accurate on paper about the Garvaghy Road problem and whether or not the march had gone through it in 1985 as he had asserted - wrongly perhaps - at lunch. (I asserted that it had not).

  
Noel Dorr  
Ambassador

17 July 1986