



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Talks about Talks1. Present Position

To date there have been four meetings in the "talks about talks" series (14 July, 11 and 18 August and 14 September) between GUP leader, Mr. James Molyneaux, DUP leader, Rev. Ian Paisley and officials in the NIO, headed by Sir Kenneth Bloomfield. The latest meeting was the most significant because of the presence of Secretary of State King, whose attendance, according to a statement by Mr. Molyneaux, had been recommended by the officials reporting on the exchanges so that he could hear the leaders' views directly. Both Molyneaux and Paisley insist that the meetings are merely "probing talks" to see whether negotiations proper can be undertaken. Further, they say, such negotiations cannot get underway while the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Secretariat remain in place. The next meeting is planned for some time this month.

2. Government Position

The Government has refrained from commenting on the "talks about talks", given unionist sensitivities. At the same time, it is not expected that these talks will result in any political movement on the part of unionists.

3. British Position

The NIO has not indicated the content or envisaged progress of the talks, confining their statements to a public comment that "exploratory discussions" are continuing (a description used by the Secretary of State King in the House of Commons on 22 June). The NIO has not been prepared so far to brief us on the substance of the talks.

4. SDLP Position

The SDLP, while welcoming the talks, do not believe that they will lead to eventual dialogue between all the constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland.

5. Future Action

The Tanaiste may wish to raise the matter at the tete a tete and request the Secretary of State to indicate the content and probable course of the "talks about talks" and to be assured that the Anglo-Irish Agreement's status and operation is being in no way undermined.

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DEVOLUTION

1. Present Position

Because of the lack of political progress in Northern Ireland on the part of the Unionist bloc since the signing of the Agreement, devolution has not featured on the agenda. It is accepted by both the OUP and DUP as the next most logical political goal, though with important qualifications; the DUP rule out "power-sharing as of right" while the OUP contains a large rump, including Molyneaux, which favours integration and has only accepted devolution faute de mieux. (The British Government has continually and emphatically ruled out integration).

It would be all but impossible if the "talks about talks" between Molyneaux, Paisley and the NIO did not touch on the matter of devolution, but lack of information precludes comment.

2. Government Policy

The Agreement provides that:

- devolution would be on a basis that would secure widespread acceptance throughout the community;
- a new North-South machinery would need to be established by the responsible authorities in the North and South to deal with devolved matters in the economic, social and cultural areas;
- the Agreement and the Conference would remain after devolution was achieved to deal with non-devolved matters affecting Northern Ireland and would resume its full activities if devolved Government failed.

The Tanaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs in an interview with the Irish Times (11 May, 1987) stated that devolution on its own would not work; the problem had to be "looked at in a comprehensive way as one involving North-South relations, the relations between the two communities in Northern Ireland and the east-west relations between Britain and Ireland. These three dimensions are linked. It has been our approach since the 1980 meeting between Mr. Haughey and Mrs. Thatcher".

3. British Position

The stated British objective in Northern Ireland is "a system of devolved government that would command widespread acceptance throughout the community". (Secretary of State, House of Commons, 1/5/87).

4. SDLP Position

The SDLP have established an ad hoc committee (John Hume, Seamus Mallon, Austin Currie and Sean Farren) to study devolution proposals but it does not intend to become active until there is some sign of political movement from Unionists.

5. Future Action

We are entitled under the Agreement to put forward our views and proposals on the modalities of bringing about devolution. However, at this juncture, in view of the Unionist position and the SDLP attitude, it would not seem to be an opportune time to do so.