



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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SECRET

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Informal Meeting between Joint Chairmen,
London 6.4.87

Meeting at Official level

[Final Text]

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The Joint Chairmen met alone in King's office from 10.00 am until noon. Officials met separately. There was no joint meeting because of pressure of time. At the conclusion of the Ministerial meeting there was a photocall occasion. A joint statement, which had been agreed at official level and thereafter at Ministerial level, was issued to the press (copy attached).

Following is an account of the main items discussed at official level.

Present:

Irish Side

Mr. N. Dorr
Secretary, D/FA

Mr. E. O Tuathail
Assistant Secretary, D/FA

British Side

Sir Robert Andrew
Permanent Secretary, NIO

Mr. Ian Burns
Deputy Permanent Secretary, NIO

Mr. David Chesterton
Under-Secretary, NIO

Secretariat:

Mr. M. Lillis
Irish Joint Secretary

Mr. Mark Elliott
British Joint Secretary

The Private Secretary to Sir Robert Andrew took a note for the British side.

Irish Government Policy

Andrew invited Dorr to "say a word" about the policy of the new administration in Dublin.

Dorr in reply mentioned the position taken by the new Government on Article I and also their acceptance of the Agreement in fulfillment of an obligation incurred by the previous administration. He said that new administration remained sceptical about the merits of the Agreement as a working process. The British side should expect that the Irish Government will press for progress in a number of areas: he mentioned job discrimination and the courts. He said it was important that action be taken to ensure that the new Government feels it has itself created progress on issues of concern to nationalists.

O Tuathail stressed the importance of ensuring that the British side took positive decisions on a number of issues soon, with the marching season and a British General election in the offing.

Lillis referred to the forthcoming Westminster election in the North and said that it was important that real progress be seen now if there was to be any diminution in the vote for extremist candidates.

Andrew said that the British side had been reassured by statements by the Taoiseach, the Tanaiste and the Minister for Justice in the US and in the Dail. He said that if the British elections were held on the 7th May there would be serious difficulty about holding a Conference meeting beforehand. This difficulty obviously would not arise if the election were held back until June or October. If 7 May was to be the date, the decision would have to be announced within the next day or two.

Nationalist and Unionist Concerns

Dorr said that, looking ahead to the end of the year, he would like to think: (1) that the Irish Government would, through developments in the Conference, have been reassured about the Agreement; (2) that elections and other inhibiting factors would have been out of the way; (3) that Sinn Fein would not have done well and the SDLP have done commensurately well and (4) that a number of things that the British side are now considering doing would be seen to have been done. All of this would, he said, help to reassure the Irish Government, defeat Sinn Fein and when a number of reforms had been completed, perhaps create political space in which unionists could possibly be a bit more open.

Andrew said that his side hoped that, when the elections are over, there would be an end to the uncertainty which has kept unionist hopes for undermining the Agreement alive. In particular it would be important that the hopes of the Official Unionists of being able to exploit a "hung Parliament" would be seen to be without foundation. He believed that no Parliamentary situation would create leverage for the unionists to remove the Agreement: he recalled the overwhelming majority in favour of the Agreement in the House of Commons in November 1985.

He said his side would agree that it was important to produce concrete results under the Agreement, particularly in the area of security co-operation which was important for unionist opinion.

Burns felt that SDLP gains could only come from Sinn Fein losses. He argued that the SDLP should be more active publicly in "selling" the Agreement.

O Tuathail said that Hume's seat was safe, Mallon's difficult seat probably so, there was a good chance for McGrady but a big question mark hung over West Belfast.

Lillis suggested that there were two quite separate votes on the nationalist side in Northern Ireland. The 100,000 or so Sinn Fein votes were, in the majority, votes which had not gone previously to the SDLP. The SDLP vote rose and fell according to the enthusiasm of its supporters. There was a swing area between the two parties but not a very large one. An important issue in West Belfast would be to bring out the full SDLP vote. In this the British could be very helpful in bringing forward decisions on pending reforms and also in helping the SDLP to highlight elements of the Belfast development plan which would be of interest to people in West Belfast, particularly projects in the West Belfast area and in the city centre where nationalists would not be hesitant about seeking employment.

Andrew said that the Belfast plan would be published in May. (Note: The Irish side of the Secretariat will be briefed on the plan in the course of next week). He asked was there anything that could be done to get the SDLP to take political advantage of the progress that had already been made. Were there any other things that could be done which would give the SDLP further issues on which to capitalise? He said that the NIO were seriously concerned about the SDLP "failure" so far to exploit the Agreement.

O Tuathail said that nationalists do see gains emerging and that our side had evidence that there is a growing conviction that the Agreement is a positive matter. There is also some evidence of eroding support for Sinn Fein. It was more important that the conviction should come "from the ground up" than through a propaganda campaign.

Lillis said that he wished to take up Andrew's question about whether there were matters which could be brought forward on which the SDLP could capitalise. He instanced a number of matters which were, in our view, "ripe", for example, various aspects of the Irish language and the Belfast plan. It was important to get these decisions out now in advance of the beginning of a campaign for an election on 7th June.

Burns said that the "delicacy" which would apply in Britain to announcing Government decisions during an election would not apply in Northern Ireland because the main British parties were not contesting the election there. The problem about the campaign period in Northern Ireland would be that Ministers would be unavailable in their constituencies. Nick Scott was perfectly safe but everyone else would be preoccupied.

Lillis said that the mention of Scott brought up the important question of the Code of Conduct.

There followed a discussion of the Code in the course of which the Irish side made it clear that any reference to the oath would be difficult, in fact possibly so difficult as to vitiate the initiative.

Andrew suggested that the Tanaiste should raise this concern at the Conference.

The discussion then turned again to the Belfast plan and Andrew said that he agreed that anything that the British side were saying about the plan should take account of the SDLP's needs.

Burns said that Stormont was planning to meet with a number of SDLP spokesmen on various issues in the near future. He suggested that Hendron should ask in public to come to discuss the plan with Ministers in the near future.

The Conference

Turning to the forthcoming meeting of the Conference, Andrew said that the Secretary of State would be saying to the Tanaiste at their private meeting that the Conference would meet in Belfast. He took it that the two items on the agenda would be: cross-border security co-operation and discrimination in employment. He said that the British side would like to include the MacBride Principles in the latter discussion.

Dorr said that, in resuming the formal meetings of the Conference under the new Co-Chairmen we had felt it would make sense to select a limited number of items for the first meeting.

Lillis asked for briefing within days on the points on security cooperation that the British side would wish to pursue at the Conference. This was agreed.

There was a discussion on the issue of the MacBride Principles and the British side agreed that it would be wiser to highlight the positive aspects in their own approach i.e. to highlight the efforts that were being made and more significantly the proposals which they had for new fair employment legislation. Attention should also be given to job-creating plans which could benefit the minority. The British, moreover, in their approach to the MacBride Principles had already moved away from the issue of some of them being illegal under the law. They would stress also the real dangers of disinvestment and discouragement to future investment from the US which the campaign on the Principle involves.

Constitutional Reform

Andrew asked whether the Taoiseach's reference to the possibility of consideration being given to constitutional reform might include Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution. (Note: He smiled as he asked this question).

The Irish side said that it did not know what was in the Taoiseach's mind exactly but that it seemed likely that at most he was simply indicating in a very general way a certain openness to exploratory contacts between parties. It seemed possible that there was some interest among the parties in Dail Eireann in considering issues such as electoral reform. The Irish side advised that if the British were to raise an issue about Articles 2 and 3 that would be very unhelpful in present circumstances. This was noted. For their part, the British said that any reassertion of Articles 2 and 3 would be damaging.

The British side said that if any consideration was being given to electoral reform there could conceivably be implications for Northern Ireland, where the form of proportional representation, used in the South is also used. In other words, should the parties in the South simply decide against the present form of proportional representation with multi-seat constituencies this might possibly create an opening for unionists who opposed the present form of proportional representation in the North to clamour for its removal. On the other hand there might possibly be scope for joint consideration of some aspects.

The British side asked whether it was likely that the Irish Government would wish to clarify the constitutional implications of Article 1 of the Agreement. The Irish side said that the Government have stated their position on this in statements by the Taoiseach in the Dail, and otherwise, and that we had no reason at present to anticipate any major new initiative on the matter.

There was a brief discussion on the McGympsey case (to test Article I of the Anglo-Irish Agreement against Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution in the Irish Courts). The Irish side said that present indications were that the plaintiffs do not appear to be pursuing it actively as no writ had been served on the Attorney General.

The Security Situation

Andrew said that there was an increase in IRA activity which was causing some worry. Aside from the INLA killings which are exceptional, the number of fatalities is low in the historical context. The security authorities are worried, however, about the revival of car bombings. He said that there were a number of shootings with direct cross-border implications and he gave examples. He said the security forces had been fortunate in finding and defusing many more bombs than had actually exploded. A bad explosion, such as what might have happened had the attempted bombing at the recent funeral of a policeman not been averted, could create a very difficult atmosphere.

International Fund

The Irish side reported on the Tanaiste's conversations with Howe in Belgium where Howe indicated that Britain, while it would not join a coordinated approach, would not object if we approached the Commission on our own. It would be very important that the British should give positive indications to the Commission if the Irish decided to follow up an approach to the Commission on its own, and not simply remain passive. The Commission need a signal of British political good will if it was to proceed with drafting a proposal to the Council.

There was agreement with Dorr's view that it was vital that results be seen and that there be a number of specific projects to be pointed to in the near future if we were to ensure continuing American interest and additional American funding, for the third, fourth and fifth years.

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6 April 1987

ANGLO-IRISH INTERGOVERNMENTAL CONFERENCE

Mr. Brian Lenihan, T.D., Tanaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, and Mr. Tom King, M.P., Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, held an informal meeting in London this morning. Mr. Lenihan was returning from a meeting of European Community Foreign Ministers in Belgium. This was the first meeting between the two joint chairmen of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference. The two Ministers discussed the future work of that Conference.