



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Conversations with Seamus Mallon

The following report reflects recent conversations with Seamus Mallon, notably a conversation in Dublin on 15 May 1988.

He has been and remains sceptical about the prospects of the SDLP/Sinn Fein talks. He remarked that he had been around this course three years ago (a reference to his part in arranging Hume's abortive discussions with the IRA Army Council in February 1985).

British Ministers have made it unmistakably clear to the SDLP that they are going to fire ahead with devolution and that they insist on holding the Irish Government and the SDLP to Article 4 of the Agreement. Although the atmosphere at the second meeting between King and the SDLP was much better, the substance of the exchanges remained the same. King asked them for their views on an assembly and on a beefed-up local Government arrangement. The SDLP were negative on both. King then asked what form of devolution they would support. They indicated that they would not take less than a full-partnership devolved government.

Mallon said he had intervened at this point to ask King whether he would like to participate in a devolved government which had no control over security. King deflected the question, but Mallon felt he had made his point. (While Mallon has talked in recent years about the possibility of SDLP taking part in a "serious devolved government" with responsibility for security, he is also conscious that the British Government are highly unlikely to contemplate the devolution of security powers and that he is relatively safe in making this an issue).

He said Nick Scott had asked to see him last month. They talked for an hour. Scott obviously wanted to bring home to him the seriousness of the British intention to press ahead with devolution. Mallon felt that that this was a friendly gesture on Scott's part and not "a nice gestapo" manoeuvre as I speculated it might be. Mallon said Scott keeps a lively interest in Northern Ireland affairs. He thought that Scott has gained, in contrast to John Moore, from the recent controversy over the changes in social security, but will never make the Cabinet under Thatcher.

He remarked that although McNamara has been making the running in the House of Commons for Labour on Gibraltar, he expects he will be "called off" by the Foreign Office team at some point. Mallon noted that George Robertson, the number 2 Foreign Office spokesman, gave the initial Labour reaction on Gibraltar which was more or less pro-Government. Mallon said Robertson is a "wee free Presbyterian" and representative of the pro-Unionist faction in the Labour party. These thoughts led Mallon on to comment on the importance of "heavies" like Brian Gould and Robin Cook who might be got to exercise a considerable influence on Northern Ireland within the party. Mallon does not regard McNamara as anywhere near "heavy" status; indeed he sees him as a slightly worrying distraction.

Mallon was concerned about the impact in the House of Commons of the Taoiseach's speeches in the United States. He agreed with the Taoiseach that he should not have to insert a condemnation of violence in every speech he makes. On the other hand, Mallon wondered if "you could not give the same message in a positive way by speaking of the importance of peace and reconciliation".

He spoke about the impact of Mrs Thatcher's reaction in the Commons on Conservative members ("you could see it") and the continuing signals coming from her office and supporters that she regards the Taoiseach as backing away from the Agreement and is determined to hold him to it. He felt the Taoiseach's responses in the Dail after his return from America and his recent meeting with the IPU delegation had had a beneficial effect, but he remains worried about the trend of British thinking and the level of understanding between the two Governments.

Mallon has had two recent meetings with John Stanley. At the first, Stanley said that they would be bringing down the number of SOSPs to 24 (at official level the figure 17 has been suggested - although on the optimistic side - and at the recent Conference King give the figure of 23). Mallon asked Stanley when he would make an announcement on this. Stanley said that King would make the announcement to which Mallon responded "are you being political?" (meaning would the British make the announcement at a time which was politically right in their view and designed to put pressure on the Irish Government and SDLP to make concessions on their side). Stanley denied the suggestion heatedly. The meeting was not a good one. A second meeting with Stanley on 16 May went better. It was arranged to allow Mallon to complain about the behaviour of the local Marines commander, Lt. Col. Chester, at a recent session arranged by the SDLP. Chester

commander, Lt. Col. Chester, at a recent session aranged by the SDLP. Chester had described the complaints of local Councillors about harassment as trivial and accused Mallon when he intervened of describing his men as thugs and acting on behalf of Provos and their supporters. The local Superintendent in Newry, French, added fuel to the fire by saying he had no obligation to deal with Mallon's assistant, John Fee, because he was not an elected representative. Mallon broke up the meeting after denying he had ever called the local army people thugs (Mallon's forbearance represents diplomacy on his part rather than his true feelings!). He added that it was intolerable that he should be asked to make a judgement about the IRA sympathies or otherwise of his constituents before making representations. He said Stanley had agreed with him on this point. The matter has been brought to the attention of the Secretariat.



Declan O'Donovan,

20 May 1988.

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