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11 DEC 1985

1. Mr. Blatchford
2. A13/5

10 DEC 1985
N.I.O. LONDON

Summary Record of the Armstrong/Nally meeting in Dublin on Saturday, 7 December 1985

MUFAX to PS/PUS(B)
Desk by 0930 hrs
10.12.85

First Meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC)

1. Mr NALLY began the meeting by saying that the preparations for the first meeting of the IGC were going well. The co-operation of the Northern Ireland Office staff concerned with those preparations and with the installation of the Secretariat building had been "beyond and above the call of duty".

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2. Later in the meeting Mr LILLIS echoed this sentiment, speaking of the efficiency and goodwill of the NIO staff.

3. Mr ANDREW recalled that we had said that the first meeting of the IGC could take place in Belfast, subject to the security situation at the time. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would be reviewing the security situation on Monday, 9 December. There were certain concerns regarding public order. The "grand committee" established by Unionists in the Northern Ireland Assembly to review the Anglo-Irish Agreement would hold its first session on 11 December, a few hundred yards from the intended location of the first meeting of the IGC. There was some risk that the arrival of helicopters at Stormont would make unionists realise that the IGC was meeting, and that they would organise a big demonstration while the meeting proceeded. Mr King would immediately contact Mr Barry if he concluded that the IGC should not meet in the intended premises. Mr LILLIS said that a suggestion of this kind would cause concern to the Irish Government, since it would be interpreted as showing that unionist reactions to the Agreement could cause the two governments to change their intentions in implementing it.

Reactions to the Agreement

4. Sir ROBERT ARMSTRONG, summarising reactions to the Agreement, said that they had been bad among unionists. The Unionist Parties were united and there was little sign of a voice of moderation. The reactions were so far concentrated in the constitutional arena. But irrationality could play a role and a dangerous situation could arise some time in 1986. On the one hand there was talk among some unionists of the idea of withdrawal from the union - Mr NALLY agreed with this - and on the other there was the factor that the para-militaries might become active. Various members of the British team pointed out that the main issue now was to convince moderate unionists of the value of the Agreement. It was not merely a question of convincing them that the Agreement presented no risk to them but also of showing them that it could deliver benefits for them. The main field for this would be enhanced co-operation against terrorism. It would be helpful if the Irish Government would encourage Mr Hume and the SDLP to respond more specifically to the Agreement. Their reactions so far, while uniformly positive, had involved only oral support.

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5. The Irish agreed about the importance of delivering results in the field of security. On the SDLP, Mr DONLON said that Mr Hume must be allowed to decide when to give a more definite reaction to the Agreement. At present he was engaged on building up support for it amongst the grass roots of the SDLP. But the Irish Government were encouraging Mr Hume to make moves and indeed the Taoiseach had seen him that morning.

6. Mr LILLIS suggested, as he several times did during the negotiations before the Agreement, that Article 1 should reassure unionists about the actions of future British Governments, and that this was a point which HMG could bring out more clearly.

7. Mr NALLY summed up this part of the discussion by saying that the two governments should "implement, implement, implement" and that both should try to reassure moderate unionist opinion.

Sentence Review

8. Mr NALLY said that the Taoiseach remained keen that the British Government should make use of the language on this subject which Mr Brennan had circulated during the negotiations. Mr ANDREW explained that there was a flow of people receiving dates for release, most of them people who had been very young when sentenced. In response to further Irish arguments, Mr ANDREW said that, if there were a substantial period of quiet on the security front, this would be taken into account, with the other factors, when each case of possible release was being considered on its merits. The Irish then argued that a statement of policy, whether in Parliament or possibly in a letter to a Church leader, would put pressure on families of prisoners to influence the latter. If such a statement could be made before the expected by-elections in Northern Ireland, this could help the SDLP in competing with Sinn Fein for nationalist votes. Mr ANDREW suggested that this subject would be eminently suitable for the IGC.

C L G Mallaby

10 December 1985

Distribution:

Mr Andrew
Mr Brennan
Mr Goodall
Mr Stark