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RJA/101/90/sh

FROM: R J ALSTON
US(POL)

12 June 1990

- cc PS/SofS (L&B) - B
- PS/MofS (L&B) - B
- PS/Dr Mawhinney (L&B) - B
- PS/PUS (L&B) - B
- 1. PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B
- Mr Burns - B
- Mr Ledlie - B
- Mr Thomas - B
- Mr Wood (L&B) - B
- Mr D J R Hill - B
- Mr J McConnell - B
- Mr Blackwell - B
- Mr Daniell - B
- Mr Dodds - B
- Dr Donnelly - B
- Mr George, RID FCO - B
- HM Ambassador - via RID

RECORD OF MEETING HELD IN LONDON ON 11 JUNE 1990 BETWEEN THE SECRETARY OF STATE AND MR COLLINS

Present

Secretary of State
 Sir Nicholas Fenn
 Mr Burns
 Mr Alston
 Mr Thomas

Mr Collins
 Mr Dorr
 Mr Gallagher
 Mr O'Rourke
 Mr O'Donovan
 Miss Anderson

The Secretary of State started by expressing his appreciation to Mr Collins and Mr Hume for their restraint in commenting on the issues which had followed the very specific RTE question posed to him the previous week. Though it might have been better to say nothing the enquirer had fortunately provided a chance to go into the totality of relationships with a subsequent question. He regretted it if this exchange had caused any problems. Mr Collins commented that it was sometimes more difficult to say nothing than

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to say something. The Irish News and An Phoblacht had seized on the answer. Questions had been tabled in the Dail for 14 June (which the Taoiseach would probably answer).

2. The Secretary of State said that he had put some ideas on the table in Dublin. Mr Collins might like to respond. Mr Collins said things that things had advanced more than we had expected at the time of the Adare Meeting. To go further we needed to get the fundamentals right. This would be a long haul. There was a need for proper structures. Without this serious difficulties would arise. The three sets of talks must form a single integral entity. Partial approaches should be avoided. We should be careful to keep the IRA in mind and not let them make any gains. If we got the fundamentals right tentative dialogue could lead to welcome changes. There was however some current confusion and it must be recognised that there had been considerable slippage from the 19 April document. (The Secretary of State concurred) it was on the basis of that document that he had made his report to Government. The Irish position then had been their bottom line not an opening bid. The purpose of the current meeting was thus to bridge the gap between then and what was now on the table

3. He then summarised Irish thinking on the outstanding points. They stood by their suggested change to the language on the Secretariat. The SDLP would have difficulty with the word "normal" which implied a limitation on the functions of the Secretariat. The Liaison Group proposal had helped on 19 April. Everybody including Mr Molyneaux recognised the linkages. It should not be difficult to extend this to acceptance for a common team to service all three strands. All that seemed envisaged at present was Secretariat to Secretariat contact.

4. The mechanisms for Irish input to the internal talks were very important politically. The timing of this was of very great

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concern. The concept of "unison" was important because anything else could underline the SDLP position. Talks of days between different sets of talks starting on 19 April had stretched into weeks. Best endeavours were inadequate here. There needed to be precision and clarity, setting out steps and related timings in advance.

5. The Secretary of State acknowledged Irish and SDLP concerns. The heart of the problem was to find something that would work for everybody whilst avoiding rigidities which would prevent it coming about. We needed something which we could all see going forward but which was acceptable to all parties constituencies. What were Mr Collins' own suggestions?

6. Mr Collins said that his sense of the SDLP position was that if the internal discussions centred mainly round devolution and this was isolated in substance or time from the other relationships the process would get nowhere and that if it was going to fail again it was not worth embarking on. When the Secretary of State asked him to expand on this, noting that the SDLP had put nothing on paper, Mr Collins said he really could not speak for them; meetings with them had been hitherto fairly general. He thought they shared the objective of the three sets of talks taking place at the same time. They seemed mystified why the Unionists were so pleased with the position they had reached with the Secretary of State but would want to tease this out. They were suspicious and annoyed by suggestions that the idea of a Parliamentary Select Committee for Northern Ireland might be pushed forward. Above all they wanted to avoid the use of a large part of the gap on internal talks which might end up with a situation where North/South talks never began.

7. This led into a lengthy, and at times circular, discussion around the point of timing. The Secretary of State underlined that no conclusions could be reached without addressing all the

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relationships. He could not however predict the speed of the process although he understood Irish and SDLP problems. He thought it probable that discussion would need to resume after the post-gap Conference, which would in fact strengthen the existing agreement. The Unionists position was that internal arrangements needed to be sufficiently talked through to know where the parties stood before other relationships could be discussed. He understood that the SDLP on the other hand would want to know more about the other relationships. It might therefore be that the talks quite soon got to a position where no more movement could be made without getting into the second phase. He retained confidence that the issue was manageable but did not know when the point of expansion would be reached. In response to a comment from Mr Collins to the effect that he would need to go back to the Unionists to agree a timetable within the gap he commented that progress hitherto had been made by not setting deadlines. The gap itself was not in effect a deadline if all were agreed that conclusions were unlikely to be made within it.

8. Mr Collins asked if it would be the Secretary of State who would judge when "substantial progress" had been made. The Secretary of State said that the process would either become deadlocked on the lines already discussed with a consequent need to establish phase two to break the deadlock or progress would be made in which case it would be for him to judge when it was sufficient to move forward. This must clearly be before any conclusion was reached in the internal talks because the SDLP would not allow otherwise.

9. Mr Burns commented that it was inconceivable that any of the parties - SDLP or Unionist - would join the internal talks without the Southern dimension being on the collective agenda. The problem was to forecast the exact course of discussion and when it would be appropriate to move to this. Mr Collins referred again to the 19 April Agreement and argued that if everyone accepted the three strand pattern it should be possible to work out a structure.

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Mr Burns said that the problem would be if this appeared to be being imposed. Mr Collins said this was not the case. It was a question of providing structure, regularising the situation and giving it a time-frame. He accepted that some trust was needed but thought it should be possible to work with Unionists to make best use of the gap. There was however no way the Irish could stand aside throughout the gap. Mr Dorr said that it was not a question of a forecast but of agreement either on mechanisms or dates. The best hope was that all concerned seemed to accept the three relationships. Could we not say to the Unionists that they did not like the present situation, but to get away from this would require forward movement on all three which would in turn require some mechanism through which Dublin could see how its role would be played. Mr Burns emphasised the problem in seeming to tell the Unionists that they must talk about North/South issues before internal arrangements. Mr Dorr said that the concern was over how long would be devoted to internal talks. The Secretary of State said that he thought the expansion of talks might be reached at a relatively early stage but that the parties had to get used to doing business with each other first. He reiterated that the main test was workability.

10. The Secretary of State said that he recognised the need to build in an arrangement to transcend communications within the Secretariat. He would be prepared to set out in a statement prior to the gap that he would have a meeting with Mr Collins on a pre-determined date to describe and set out for him the agenda of the talks and to discuss the respective time-frame. Such a meeting could be held around or just before the middle of the gap. Mr Gallagher expressed some scepticism about this and argued that it would help the Unionists to set out the stages in advance. The Secretary of State repeated that he saw no difficulty about doing this once the process was under way but thought it difficult to arrange bilaterally before the process started. He then suggested

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the meeting should look at some possible words for his pre-gap statement. He circulated a piece of paper (attached). The first paragraph of this was a variant of language he had produced on 28 May. The second paragraph was new. Mr Collins said that this left the two Governments far apart on the basis of the 19 April Agreement. He feared the process would not get to first base because the SDLP would have similar problems. The Secretary of State said that, if this occurred, it would be a form of SDLP pre-condition although Mr Hume had always denied having any. He would nonetheless talk it through patiently with them. He stressed he was that cautious because the parties were unsure of each other. Their leaders had to cope with problems of deeply ingrained mistrust and also of the intricacies of taking their own constituencies with them. He emphasised again that if he could not find a way forward he would pause, but not before talking the issues through at length.

11. Mr Dorr said that he would like to explore a little further where the Secretary of State stood. He understood him to be saying that the Unionists would be frightened off by anything specific at this stage but that he would content to make a general statement early in the process. The gap appeared to be on timing and on the triggering of North/South talks. A detached outsider would see Unionist willingness to talk and general recognition (including by the Irish) of the need to transcend the Agreement as a basis for the way forward. Such an observer would find it hard to understand reluctance to give concrete form to this willingness to talk. It would leave the Irish Government in a false position if they seemed to be expressing a willingness to transcend the Agreement with no guarantee on this point. The Secretary of State recalled that the Unionists had told him they would come to Round Table Talks when he asked them. Discussion about the SDLP position after the beginning of the gap might convince them that this process could not begin without establishment of a timetable for all three strands but it was difficult to do this in advance.

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12. Sir N Fenn, replying to a rhetorical question from Mr Collins as to how the position would be defended, said that he detected across the party spectrum in Dublin a shared view that something had been changed and that there was a window of opportunity which must not be lost. He believed that there was a way to construct an approach to defending the proposed position without achieving mechanistic certainty. This would acknowledge the phenomenon he had mentioned, agree with John Hume that the process must have the three dimensions, accept the talks which began on internal arrangements would ineluctably lead to talks on the other dimensions, and conclude that the Government thought it right on that basis to lend their full support to the process.

13. Mr Dorr said that he wanted to clarify that the Secretary of State was really sure that it would create unacceptable strains to reopen this point with the Unionist leaders. It was one of fundamental importance. The Secretary of State said that he was reasonably confident that flexibility would be there once the situation had been clarified in preliminary talks. If however he tried to impose something in advance he was not sure he could deliver it. He quoted the process by which the problems of the Secretariat had been resolved with the Unionists. Things had been achieved at the end which would have seemed improbable at the beginning. If the SDLP declared their hand on timing he would have to seek to resolve it. Mr Hume would either have to go public soon or introduce it into the negotiations. An agenda to cover the full gap and ensure its productive use might be acceptable to the Unionists but only if they committed themselves as part of the process of negotiation with the SDLP, not in the context of a pre-negotiation with Dublin.

14. Mr Collins said that he would be willing to envisage the East/West talks before the North/South process if this enabled

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progress to be made. Mr Gallagher thought this might be helpful. Mr Burns commented that he would not want to relax the logic of parallel progress on all three strands for purely tactical reasons.

15. Mr Dorr probed the Secretary of State on the possibilities for introducing into the proposed language phrases such as "and I believe it should be after x weeks" or "and in any case within [x weeks]". The Secretary of State emphasised that he remained uneasy about such formulations.

16. Mr Collins emphasised that somebody would have to defend a position in the Dail. The political parties would be forebearing to a degree but not too far. He must be in a position to say something and felt that he still had a real problem.

17. The Secretary of State summarised this phase of the discussion by saying that he could envisage a way of getting some timetabling agreed once the political parties were involved in the process. He understood Irish concerns but did not want to be pressed to set out a timetable until he had an idea of the blueprints of all parties.

18. There was then an adjournment for supper in the course of which the Secretary of State and Mr Collins spent about forty minutes in private discussion. When they rejoined officials the Secretary of State summarised the sense of this discussion as follows.

19. He would shortly meet the SDLP again and officials would embark on the process on meetings with Unionist leaders. Assuming that there was a genuine problem about timing with the SDLP officials would indicate this to the Unionists to see if a resolution could be secured. It was quite possible that the Unionists would want to come back to discuss this further with the Secretary of State in which case he would be happy to do so. He stressed that this would be a way of treating the issue organically rather than involving him in reopening issues with the Unionists.

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20. Other things being equal Mr Collins and the Secretary of State would touch base with each other again in the last three or four days of June. If all went well he would aim to make a statement in Parliament in the Renewal Debate on 3 or 5 July. Subject to the Chief Constable's commitments the Conference would meet on 17 July, then again in early September. They had agreed that no significance would be attached to the length of this gap in the context of the political development process. At their meeting on 13 June the two Heads of Government would be invited merely to acknowledge the ongoing process of discussion. In talking to the Press the two Ministers would say that further progress had been made in an ongoing and complex discussion on which they would continue to keep in touch.

[signed]

R J ALSTON
Ext 2507