

C O N F I D E N T I A L

Political Affairs

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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND, OCTOBER TO DECEMBER 1995

Summary

The undoubted success of President Clinton's visit, in terms of imparting fresh momentum to the peace process, tended to obscure the fact that it had been preceded by a period of intense diplomatic activity as the British and Irish Governments sought to cement an agreement which the President could endorse. For different reasons,

C O N F I D E N T I A L

inn Fein's dislike of the twin-track strategy was probably matched by that of the Unionists; but in the flurry of political talks which took place before Christmas, it was the Unionist proposal for an elected body which was steadily moving up the agenda.

Political development

2. Relations between the two Governments were dominated by the necessity of reaching agreement on the twin-track strategy in advance of President Clinton's visit, scheduled for the end of November. Inevitably, much of the debate focused on the decommissioning leg of the strategy, and how HMG's requirement for a reasonable degree of confidence to be instilled into the political process could be reconciled with the deeply-seated objections of Republicanism to giving up any arms as a pre-condition for admittance to that process.

3. Speculation about a London-Dublin Summit to launch twin-tracks fluctuated with the intensity of the debate on decommissioning. In mid-October, the Taoiseach's comments that agreement on all-party talks was "tantalisingly close", combined with the news that Tony Lake and Nancy Soderberg were in London, produced a wave of optimism. This proved to be only temporary. In November, Dublin anger at Michael Ancram's release of the 'Building Blocks' paper was matched by the hostile response in Northern Ireland to the Taoiseach's proposals for a compromise on decommissioning (coupled with the suggestion that an official expression of regret from HMG about Bloody Sunday would be helpful) - the speech giving particular offence by being made on the eve of Remembrance Sunday, and only a few days after a van-load of explosives was intercepted at Carrickmacross in County Monaghan. Pundits soon began to draw the conclusion that, since no agreement between the two Governments on twin-tracks seemed possible, the Clinton visit would be cancelled.

4. By the third week in November, there were suggestions that a Summit in advance of the Presidential visit might still be possible; but by 28 November angry accusations of bad faith from Dublin (British briefing was alleged to be pointing up a Taoiseach/Tanaiste split following the previous weekend's meeting of officials when a deal had once again slipped away after looking secure) still left most observers confident that no agreement was possible before the President arrived. When the last minute deal was in fact struck, the discomfited pundits sought to expose the differences on issues of principle which were felt to still exist between the two Governments, beneath a heavy top-dressing of fudge. Although December saw the inter-Governmental relationship back on the rails - a PM/Taoiseach meeting in Dublin before Christmas was specifically designed to deepen understanding across the spectrum of Anglo-Irish issues, and a trilateral meeting between the two Governments and the Alliance Party gave a practical demonstration of twin-tracks in action - the role to be played in political development by a body elected in Northern Ireland was surfacing as a new area of disagreement.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

5. Considerably less attention was paid to the fact that the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement had passed virtually unnoticed in Northern Ireland, with more attention being paid to the Queen and President Robinson jointly attending a function in London to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the Queen's Colleges in Ireland. And although much was made of the fact that a visit to Northern Ireland by a serving American President was a unique event, few bothered to ponder that such a visit would have been inconceivable without the London-Dublin relationship being in a reasonably healthy state.

The political parties

UUP

6. The UUP devoted the period to developing their ideas for an elected body as a vehicle for taking forward the political process, with David Trimble setting out his stall to the Taoiseach, the Tanaiste, President Clinton (both in Washington and in Belfast), the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State, and Michael Ancram. In addition, during December, two meetings were held with the SDLP, and one each with the DUP and Alliance. By the end of the period the idea of an elected body had moved well up the political agenda.

7. It remained unclear, however, whether the UUP's ideas for an elected body could become part of, or were intended as an alternative to, the political leg of the twin-track strategy. Towards the end of October, both Reg Empey and John Taylor were distancing the UUP from twin-tracks, portraying it as a strategy to get Sinn Fein into talks before the conditions in paragraph 10 of the Joint Declaration were fulfilled. Shortly afterwards, Trimble himself indicated that he was unhappy with certain aspects of the strategy, although he did not close the door on it, and his public rejection of the Tanaiste's invitation to participate in talks on the basis of the Joint Communique made it clear that the Party remained opposed to joining in any process jointly sponsored by the two Governments. Recognition of twin-tracks was given to the extent of a UUP delegation meeting with the International Body led by Senator Mitchell on 18 December; but in the flurry of meetings which took place before Christmas, it became increasingly clear that the UUP saw an elected body as a better bet than twin-track talks for nudging forward the political process. When, in late November, Trimble launched the UUP's new 'Statement of Aims', proposing an administrative Assembly with strongly integrationist trappings, it looked as if the Party was proposing a model for an elected body which it would be impossible for non-Unionists to accept.

8. Despite (or perhaps because of) being aware that the DUP also favoured the concept of an elected body, there was little evidence of a desire to make a common cause on the issue. There was a measure of agreement in some areas: in mid-November, David Trimble joined with Ian Paisley and Robert McCartney in a show of solidarity

C O N F I D E N T I A L

- 3 -

CP32655

C O N F I D E N T I A L

On the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement; a month later the two Unionist parties agreed to uphold their electoral agreement whereby they would not field candidates against each other in constituencies where a split vote would allow in a non-Unionist. At a re-run of the 'Visions for the Union' event, held in Enniskillen in early December, the rejection of a role for Dublin in the affairs of Northern Ireland was equally fervent in both camps; and before Christmas, MPs from both Unionist parties voted against the Government's policy on fishing quotas. But despite general agreement on the need for elections, and the broad similarity in the proposals of the two parties about the role which might be played by an elected body, there was no sign of any attempt to develop joint proposals.

DUP

9. The difficulties in cementing a meaningful relationship between the Unionist parties were evident throughout the period. David Trimble's decision to visit Dublin early in October was roundly condemned by Ian Paisley as an exercise in futility which showed the UUP leadership dancing to Dublin's tune. The decision in mid-November to suspend the workings of the Unionist Commission, it was made clear, was directly attributable to the failure of the UUP to "fulfil its duty to the people of Northern Ireland" by supporting the initiative. At the DUP Annual Conference held in Craigavon towards the end of November, attacks by Paisley, Peter Robinson and Nigel Dodds on the UUP for their failure to develop Unionist unity were climaxed by Sammy Wilson's tirade (accompanied by cheers, whistles, stamping feet and football rattles) against "David Tremble". (Trimble himself subsequently deplored this as "crude abuse" which showed how shallow was the DUP commitment to real Unionist unity.)

10. That apart, the public pronouncements of the DUP leadership showed little variation from the tried and true. The period began with Ian Paisley warning the Government that it "must not permit the lies of Bruton or the dollars from the White House to buy [sic] a sell-out of the Ulster people" - a rehearsal, presumably, for the message he delivered during his visit to Washington at the end of the month. Early in December, on receipt of an invitation from Dublin to join in preparatory talks, he accused HMG of abdicating its position as governing power in Northern Ireland. In an interview on RTE Radio shortly afterwards, he promised that Loyalists would "fight to the death" to prevent unification. The presence of an ROI Minister at an EC function in Armagh prompted him to stage a public walk-out. At the end of December, Paisley Junior was claiming that RUC numbers were to be slashed, and the Force reorganised in an attempt to appease Nationalist demands. Distrust of the twin-track process was underscored by a decision by the Party not to make a submission to the International Body.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

- 4 -

CP32655

C O N F I D E N T I A L

11. Yet despite the traditional bluster - and it was perhaps significant that Paisley himself was the major spokesman during the period, rather than Peter Robinson - and the constant reiterations that the DUP would never talk to Sinn Fein in twin-tracks until the arms issue had been resolved, the DUP's attitude towards what might be achieved in an elected body operating outside twin-tracks was noticeably more accommodating than the UUP's. It was notable, too, that the Party failed to excoriate in any serious manner those responsible for the removal of the oath of allegiance for QCs; the decision not to replace the 600 troops of the Fermanagh Roulement battalion; the announcement by NIE that the Union Flag would no longer fly outside its HQ (and the related declaration by Sinn Fein activists that their next target was the National Anthem played at the closedown of BBC TV); nor the early release of 80 prisoners under the new remission of sentences legislation.

SDLP

12. As was perhaps inevitable in a period when the other members of the Nationalist consensus had such a high profile, most SDLP heads remained below the parapet. In late October, the Party responded angrily to John Alderdice's trenchant criticisms of John Hume's and Gerry Adams' lack of personal commitment to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation; and in mid-November, following UUP complaints, Hume issued a statement denying that he was trying to avoid a meeting with David Trimble. Eddie McGrady showed his frustration when he demanded that 100,000 legally-held firearms should be included in decommissioning, on the grounds that IRA violence had arisen in response to Loyalist paramilitarism and the actions of some sections of the RUC. Whether the Party's sense of frustration at the pace of developments (as announced by Mark Durkan before the Party's Annual Conference) was affected by Hume's failure to collect the Nobel Peace Prize remained an interesting but unanswerable question.

13. The delicacy of the SDLP position was exposed at the Party Conference on 18 November where, as anticipated, attention focussed on a motion calling for the SDLP to rule out "pre-election pacts with any other party or group". Although Seamus Mallon, Eddie McGrady and Joe Hendron all declared in favour of the motion, a majority of delegates (particularly from the west of the Province) preferred to keep their options open, and by a 93 to 53 vote, the proposal was referred back to the Executive. Hume, meanwhile, despite being outside the arena of inter-Governmental activity, still saw himself as being capable of brokering a deal on twin-tracks. But the muted reception given to the text of a statement released by Hume in November (reportedly endorsed by Adams) which had been drafted for signature by the two Governments, demonstrated his limited influence in the bigger game.

14. Relations with the UUP however began to thicken towards the end of the period. Two meetings with the UUP were held during December, with talk of another joint delegation going to see the PM

C O N F I D E N T I A L

- 5 -

CP32655

C O N F I D E N T I A L

- the New Year. Although the purported basis of the meetings remained social and economic issues, politics inevitably featured. It was a measure of the progress which had been made when, as the year ended, the new Party Chairman, Jonathan Stephenson, declared that the UUP proposals for an elected body were "intrinsicly unworkable but still worth discussing". If it did not constitute a breakthrough, at least it made slightly less unbelievable earlier reports that John Taylor was due to address an SDLP Constituency Association in Londonderry.

Alliance Party

15. Unusually, Alliance found itself as part of the Unionist mainstream. The Party's proposals for an elected body - a 90-member "negotiating convention" operating through a committee system over a 12-18 month lifetime - were released in mid-November, endorsed by Paddy Ashdown a month later, and formed the basis of the trilateral talks between Alliance and the two Governments before Christmas. The meeting between John Alderdice and the PM (in October), the almost obligatory visit to the US by a Party delegation, and a round of inter-party meetings with both Unionists and Loyalists left Alliance well placed to urge its customary centrist view.

Loyalists

16. A year on from the CLMC ceasefire, their political representatives may have been contemplating the complications which come with the adoption of democratic principles. On the positive side, the anniversary of the ceasefire on 13 October was marked by rallies in Belfast and Londonderry, drawing crowds (an estimated 15-20,000 in Belfast) well in excess of what the organisers could have hoped for. David Ervine further bolstered his progressive credentials by sharing a platform with Mitchel McLaughlin at a fringe meeting during the Labour Party Conference. In mid-October, after a Party Conference which debated a motion calling for the PUP to confront Sinn Fein in public, and a further meeting with Michael Ancram, Billy Hutchinson announced that, in the context of twin-tracks, he expected discussions with Sinn Fein to take place within weeks. The UDP were less wholehearted in their endorsement of this latter proposition, and referred to the ambiguity surrounding Sinn Fein's permanent commitment to peace and democracy. Both parties closed ranks, however, when an approach was made at the end of November by David Trimble, inviting the CLMC to grab the moral high ground by acting in advance of a rumoured PIRA gesture of a hand-up of weapons in advance of the Clinton visit. Loyalist sources denounced Trimble's intervention as crude opportunism - the UUP having previously refused to meet either Loyalist party - and an attempt to manipulate the situation for the benefit of the UUP. In December, Lindsay Robb was imprisoned for ten years by a Scottish court for his part in a gun-running operation. The PUP subsequently claimed that Robb had been set-up and framed by British Intelligence; but it was half-hearted, and

C O N F I D E N T I A L

- 6 -

CP32655

C O N F I D E N T I A L

vidence, perhaps, of a realisation by the Party that mingling with Presidents and Prime Ministers imposes subsequent limitations on the terms in which the Establishment can be criticised.

Sinn Fein

17. Although the public profile of Sinn Fein remained higher than that of any of the other parties, it is doubtful if the period was regarded in retrospect with complete satisfaction. It began with a special delegate conference (on 31 September) at the unlikely venue of the Royal Dublin Society, where a certain degree of "comradely criticism" of the Party leadership was offered. Shortly afterwards, newspaper reports called attention to the small attendances at the ceasefire anniversary demonstrations in August, and spoke of worries within Sinn Fein ranks at the steady leakage of support the Party was experiencing.

18. More significantly, perhaps, was the negative response to a heavily reported statement by Gerry Adams on 8 October which included a declaration that "the achievement of peace must involve a permanent end to all violence" - wording intended to pick up on the phraseology of the Joint Declaration, and allegedly demonstrating that Sinn Fein had met the requirement for entry into the political process. Although, predictably, the statement was welcomed by the SDLP and Dublin, HMG and the Unionists took the line that actions, rather than words, were required from Sinn Fein.

19. The hurt caused shortly afterwards by the Taoiseach's refusing a joint meeting with John Hume and Gerry Adams was probably greater than the pain inflicted early in November by a breakdown in the talks between Sinn Fein and HMG. Although the release of the 'Building Blocks' paper considerably undermined their position, the Sinn Fein leadership lost no time in placing the blame for the failure on HMG. Adams declared that the ceasefire was "unanchored" and the peace process no longer existed. A few days later, on an occasion considerably more important for its symbolism than for its rhetoric, an estimated 1,000 Republicans invaded the Ulster Hall to hear Martin McGuinness give an update on the peace process, before introducing Irish dancing and footage of RUC officers batoning demonstrators on the Lower Ormeau Road.

20. Against that background, the tenor of Sinn Fein rhetoric was entirely predictable. Numerous claims were made - on either side of the Clinton visit - that the peace process was on the point of failure, or was at an end. Facing the inevitability of the decommissioning body, the Sinn Fein campaign to demonstrate the impossibility of giving up arms was intensified. Mitchel McLaughlin claimed it was impossible to say that peace was permanent while the conditions which gave rise to 25 years of violence still existed. Later, McLaughlin also claimed that the British were spoiling for a fight, and that their refusal to pick up "the threads which make up the tapestry of the peace process" had brought the situation to the verge of disaster. IRA punishment attacks increased, and the

C O N F I D E N T I A L

- 7 -

CP32655

C O N F I D E N T I A L

Activities of Direct Action Against Drugs (DAAD) were widely interpreted as a reminder from the IRA of its continuing ability to exert armed authority over the Nationalist community. Such was the climate of opinion that no-one knew what interpretation to put on reports that Martin McGuinness was withdrawing from the Provisional Army Council to create space between Sinn Fein and PIRA; the significance to attach to the graffiti appearing in West Belfast urging Adams to remember the fate of Michael Collins; or to guess what might be the consequences on local opinion of Sinn Fein "advice" causing a West Belfast soccer club (Donegal Celtic FC) to pull out of a match against the RUC.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L

- 8 -

CP32655

C O N F I D E N T I A L

ALARY: OCTOBER - DECEMBER 1995

2 October David Trimble met the Taoiseach in Dublin.

13 October First anniversary of the Loyalist ceasefire.

17 October Intergovernmental Conference held in Belfast.

21 October UUP Annual Conference held at Portrush.

1 November David Trimble met President Clinton in Washington.

6 November Prime Minister and Taoiseach held talks in Jerusalem whilst attending the funeral of Yitzhak Rabin.

17/18 November SDLP Annual Conference held at Newcastle.

17 November Over 80 prisoners released when remission was restored from one third to half for those convicted since 1989.

20 November Four Church Leaders issued a joint statement condemning punishment beatings.

21 November F.W. de Klerk addressed the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.

25 November DUP Annual Conference held at Craigavon.

28 November Prime Minister and Taoiseach issued a joint communique at Downing Street to launch the twin track process.

30 November President and Mrs Clinton arrived in Belfast.

20 December Intergovernmental Conference held in Dublin.

20 December First of the tri-lateral talks held in Dublin with the Alliance Party.

21 December Prime Minister visited Northern Ireland and then travelled to Dublin for a meeting with the Taoiseach.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

- 9 -

CP32655