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R14/98

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FROM: JOHN FISHER
Anglo Irish Secretariat
12 May 1998



See Distribution List

Jaqueline

Mr McCusker
to note K. pt.

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

MEETING WITH THE IRISH SIDE: MR SEMPLE'S VISIT

Mr Donoghue
12.5

Mr Semple, accompanied by Mr McCusker, Mr Ferguson and Mr Bell had lunch with Mr Donoghue, the Irish Secretary, and members of his team at Maryfield on 30 April.

SUMMARY

2. Irish side anxious to ascertain how future devolved constitutional arrangements are to be taken forward, and in what time-scale. Options for North/South Ministerial Council joint Secretariat discussed. No agreements possible ahead of ascertaining views of the parties, save to keep in contact.

DETAIL

3. The Irish side were starting with a 'blank page'; the NI side had 'no formal ideas'. Mr Semple stressed that the NI parties had not yet been able to engage on practicalities and might not do so for some time given their understandable preoccupation with the Referendum, and the elections which might follow. Parties were being made aware of the issues but their views could not be anticipated or decisions taken. However, Parliament Buildings with all the facilities it possessed seemed a likely location for the Shadow NI Executive; the Irish side felt that the SDLP would be 'ultimately relaxed' over this location and that Seamus Mallon (as likely Deputy First Minister and pragmatic) would accept it. As to the location of the Assembly, the Irish side suggested that the SDLP might have ruled out the Interpoint building and doubted whether Castle Buildings would be sufficiently large to house the 108 member Assembly. However, it seemed that the SDLP had not ruled it out.

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4. Moving on, the Irish side were told that it was not possible to anticipate how responsibilities would be shared between Members of the NI Executive or the impact this would have for the present structure of NI Departments. Indeed, decisions on the allocation of Ministerial portfolios and on the committee structure of the Assembly might determine the NI Departmental Structure. It was too early to say. However, a matrix of the committee structure seemed unlikely to be settled quickly. In addition to departmental committees other possibilities included a committee on European matters and another on reserved matters, the latter with a role of shadowing and influencing decisions by the Secretary of State on her reserved responsibilities. But these would be matters for the Assembly, and it would also be for the Assembly and Executive Committee to decide whether to retain the present structure of statutory bodies, including Area Boards.

5. As to support for the Shadow Assembly and Shadow Executive, appropriate resources were to be made available. Those serving these bodies would be technically responsible to the Secretary of State but, progressively, have account for the views of Shadow NI Ministers; a position the Irish side saw as similar to the 'caretaker' situation which arose in the South when ever there was a change of Government there. The Irish side also pointed to the instinctive suspicion there would be (by some parties who had never been in power) of civil servants, and the tendency there would be to rely on their own political advisors.

6. The Irish side invited thoughts on the likely time-table for developments and agreed the advantages of an early Assembly meeting after the elections to deal with administrative matters (including approving appointments as First and Second Ministers and the appointment of a Presiding Officer) to avoid the July 'Drumcree factor'. Also, the Irish side did not want to delay the first North/South Ministerial Council meeting (even this meant proceeding without a formal NI team) but accepted this could not take place until late July. The Irish side proposed that Council meetings should alternate between Belfast and Dublin, but were not in favour of an IFI type solution that there should be separate NI and Irish Secretariats. (It was not however, clear from subsequent discussion that the Irish had thought through the presentational difficulties of a single site, whether in Belfast or Dublin).

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Instead, the Irish and NI Secretariats should be co-located; to do so would help foster an identity and common purpose for the Secretariat. This was notwithstanding the suggestion made by the British side that separate locations for the NI and Irish Secretariats could work equally well with present technology, the NIO being an example of this. Mr Donoghue was clear in his mind that it had been agreed there was to be a permanent location in NI for the Ministerial Council; consequently the Irish side assumption was that there would be joint Secretaries (a single head of Secretariat seemed incompatible with a joint secretariat) working along the lines of the present Maryfield arrangements. The Irish side visualised a small core Secretariat drawing when necessary on the expertise of Irish departments; Southern departments were 'not thirsting' to have permanent representatives on the Irish side of the Secretariat.

7. Ruling out the possibility of reaching decisions (these judgements had to be made by the Assembly and NI Executive Committee), the NI team's view was that any arrangement would need to be sensitive to perceptions of there being a 'third seat of power'. The spectrum of options ranged from dedicated premises in NI for the Ministerial Council and a joint secretariat to there being entirely separate secretariat locations in Belfast and Dublin. Decisions could only be made and compromise struck between the Assembly once elected. There would be obvious differences of view between the Sinn Fein and Unionist parties and the Irish Government.

8. Mr Donoghue said that in contacts the Irish side had had with Unionists there had been no suggestion of their wanting a 'minimalist approach' but neither did they want a 'spat' with them. There were key differences between the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the proposed North/South Ministerial Council. But it was not clear what the Irish side had in mind when Mr Donoghue referred to the Irish room for manoeuvre under the proposed North/South_M Ministerial Council being 'different' from that at Maryfield. Alternatives were canvassed including rotating offices between Belfast and Dublin every 6 months (which the Irish side said they could live with provided the same core personalities were involved). As to the numbers and levels of staffing, the Irish side working assumption was that it would be staffed for their part by DFA officials, but did not rule out inclusion of a member of the Taoiseach's Department. It was agreed that the staffing arrangements would be dependent

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upon the 'level of commitment' of the Secretariat. On support mechanisms, it would be for a NI Cabinet Office (not NI Departments) to co-ordinate work. On the Irish side, Mr Donoghue said that no decision had been taken on whether work would be co-ordinated by the Taoiseach's Office but there was the expectation that the Secretariat would be able to initiate proposals, and that it would be similar to and as proactive as the Maryfield Secretariat.

9. Asked what work was being undertaken on the Irish side in relation to those areas for North/South co-operation identified in the Agreement, this was put at 'very little' by Mr Donoghue and in the main this seemed to be limited to the use of the Irish language. The Irish side were pressed to address the financial and funding implications, staffing and other issues and accepted the need for follow up. It was agreed that both sides would meet again.

OTHER MATTERS

10. The Irish side also took the opportunity to ask questions about additional peace and reconciliation funding. Responding, Mr Semple said that the US position was not entirely clear (any additional funds seemed more likely to be channelled through IFI) and £100m ECU had been entered in the European Commission's budget for 1999. It would be mid May before decisions were announced on the extent of any additional Treasury funding for NI.

11. There was no discussion of the BIC or BIIGC.

Signed

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