

CONFIDENTIAL

33

ASST
SEC 150/5
08 MAY 1998

**FROM: ALAN SMYTH
CENTRAL SECRETARIAT
8 MAY 1998**

Mr Ferguson

**OPTIONS FOR THE LOCATION OF THE NORTH/SOUTH MINISTERIAL
COUNCIL AND SECRETARIAT**

**Issue: Identification of options for the location of the
meetings of the North/South Ministerial
Council and the siting of its Secretariat.**

**Timing: Urgent (in light of forthcoming meetings with
the party nominees).**

**Action required: To note the arguments for and against the various
options which have been drawn up to inform
discussion.**

Introduction

1. You asked me to give consideration to the options for the location of the North/South Ministerial Council and its Secretariat. This submission is, in the best tradition, a cock-shy and has been designed to stimulate debate and generate further thinking.
2. From the outset it is clear that the geographic base for both will be a critical and sensitive issue for all the parties and the sooner we can ascertain firm views which will allow us to come to some consensus on

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this issue, the better. It is recognised that the ultimate decision will be for the First and Deputy First Ministers and the Irish Government but we should be in a position to aid discussion by putting realistic proposals to the parties when we meet with them.

Background

3. The Agreement indicates that the North/South Council will be supported by a standing joint Secretariat staffed by members of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and the Irish Civil Service. The use of the word 'joint' immediately suggests co-location (an arrangement which I understand the Irish will be pushing very hard for). However, a 'joint Secretariat' does not necessarily mean physical togetherness (given the need for each part of the Secretariat to be close to its respective executive and the fact that we are now in the age of instant electronic communication) and as a result I can envisage a number of other options which need, at the very least, some consideration.
4. So what are the likely views of the two main political groupings?

Nationalist views

5. Nationalists will want to see the Council and its Secretariat located in a prestigious setting in Northern Ireland, but geographically remote from the Assembly in order to give it a measure of perceived and physical independence. It is also a fair bet that they would like to see it meeting permanently at one location although they may be equally satisfied to see it alternating between two permanent sites north and south. Neither option will curry favour with unionists. I am also confident that Nationalists will prefer co-location of Northern Ireland and Irish civil servants so that the Secretariat is seen as a strong, dynamic body with a firm collective grip on the daily management of the work of the

CONFIDENTIAL

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Council. It goes without saying that they will resist strenuously any Unionist attempts, perceived or otherwise, to water down the status of the Council by giving it a standing less than that which will be enjoyed by the Assembly.

Unionist views

6. Unionists will take opposing views on all these points. They will argue for the bi-location of civil servants (on IFI lines) to avoid being accused of establishing a new Maryfield with direct input to the running of transferred matters. They will want the northern part of the secretariat located close to or alongside the Assembly to negate any perception of independence that would result from remote location. They will probably be in favour of the Council having no permanently fixed quarters with it meeting in various locations north and south. Alternatively they could want it to meet in the Assembly building (Senate Chamber?) to reinforce the primacy of the Assembly in the hearts and minds of the both the Council members and the electorate at large. They will be anxious from the outset to take steps to prevent the Council taking on a life of its own.

Options

7. There are two main possibilities with several options built around each. I think it would be practical and sensible for the Ministerial Council to meet at the same location as its Secretariat, given that the Agreement envisages meetings taking place on a regular and frequent basis. Co-location, with instant access to the support of a full secretariat will reduce the need for stage management and could give meetings a business-like dynamic. I have therefore taken this arrangement as a working assumption.

CONFIDENTIAL

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8. The two main options can be based around the configuration of the Secretariat. They are as follows:

A co-located Secretariat

Either:

- i. a co-located Secretariat in Northern Ireland Assembly building with accommodation for Council meetings;
- ii. a co-located Secretariat in downtown Belfast with accommodation for Council meetings; or
- iii. a co-located Secretariat outside Belfast (Armagh and Londonderry?) with accommodation for the Council.

A bi-located Secretariat

Either:

- iv. a bi-located Secretariat in the Northern Ireland Assembly building and Dublin with Council meetings held alternately in the Assembly building and Dublin;
- v. a bi-located Secretariat in downtown Belfast and Dublin with accommodation for alternate Council meetings North and South; or
- vi. a bi-located Secretariat outside Belfast (Armagh and Londonderry?) and Dublin with accommodation for alternate Council meetings North and South.

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Location of the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference Secretariat

7. Others are looking at the location of the secretariat for the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference but I think it would be appropriate to record here the reason why we would resist a combined secretariat for the North-South Ministerial Council and the BIIC. While there are good reasons to ensure close liaison between the N/S Secretariat and that of the BIIC the former is accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly while the latter is answerable to Westminster. The same problem does not arise for the Irish although I understand that preliminary discussions with them have indicated that they would favour two distinct teams. I would, however, not discount location in the same building if it was for business reasons like economies of scale etc.

Conclusion

8. There is no right or wrong answer. However, I think we should recognise party sensitivities and try to find some middle ground acceptable to both them and the Irish. If we discount the Assembly building as a location (to satisfy nationalists) we could also discourage claims to have a co-located Secretariat based permanently in Northern Ireland with the Ministerial Council meeting at the same location (which would please unionists and give them cover from their fellow unionist critics). I think that the options most likely to succeed would be either 8v or 8vi outlined above. Both would please nationalists by giving the Council geographical independence by removing it from the Assembly precincts but could also satisfy unionism by demonstrating that the bi-location gives recognition to both sovereign territories. However, much will depend on the attitude of the Irish government.

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9. I would be happy to discuss further.

[signed.]

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