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Note

5/11/13

Radio reports on the morning of 23 November stated that an SDLP delegation including Mr. Séamus Mallon would have meetings that day with the Taoiseach and Minister to discuss the latest position arising out of the British inter-party conference proposals and the resignation of Gerry Fitt from the SDLP. Enquiries in the Department, the Department of the Taoiseach and the Fianna Fáil Headquarters failed to elicit any information about a request from the SDLP leadership for any contacts of the kind described.

The Taoiseach was consulted about the matter and indicated that, in spite of his crowded programme, he would be prepared to see Mallon if he turned up subject to Mallon and other members of the party withdrawing their various recent statements alleging that the Taoiseach and Government had "abandoned the Irish dimension". These allegations completely misrepresented what the Taoiseach had said. In regard to the Taoiseach's statements setting out our policy approach (Waterville speech, replies to Parliamentary Questions on 17 October, transcript of remarks on RTE programme on 2 September) these made it quite clear that the Irish dimension and the quest for national reunification were by no means abandoned. The position was that as an immediate priority an acceptable form of devolved administration in the North should be sought in order to get the political process moving once more. The Taoiseach had described his position in detail to John Hume in a conversation at Waterville and Hume at that stage had said that he appreciated what the Taoiseach's aims were and notably that the immediate stance of the Government must be seen as part of a process. The Taoiseach referred to reported statements by Duffy and Mallon in particular which misrepresented our stance seriously. This sort of comment would have to stop.

Shortly afterwards Mr. John Hume telephoned to explain that he was not looking for an appointment with the Taoiseach or the Minister. In the SDLP they did not consider at present that any advantage could be gained from political contacts with the Government. The report ascribed to Seamus Mallon and suggesting

that they were seeking a meeting was based on a misunderstanding by RTE. Mallon and Hume would be taking part in RTE's Frontline programme that evening (23 November) and Séamus Mallon had said something to the effect that he might see the Minister or Taoiseach while he was in Dublin. This unguarded remark had been taken by RTE to mean that a formal contact had been arranged.

I thought it appropriate to tell Hume briefly of the Taoiseach's reaction to the report. I referred particularly to Paddy Duffy's rather offensive statements carried in the Irish Press.

Mr. Hume mentioned that he would be at his usual headquarters (the Shelbourne Hotel) throughout the weekend. I conveyed news of my conversation with Hume to the Department of the Taoiseach (Mr. Murray). I also informed the PSM in Strasbourg of the developments described above.

At 10.45 the British Ambassador telephoned the Secretary to draw attention to remarks made by Mr. Atkins at Westminster in reply to a P.Q. about the Irish dimension. The Ambassador was reacting to the report about a Government-SDLP meeting. The phrase used by Mr. Atkins, the text of which the Ambassador subsequently sent in to the Department, was the same as that contained in Mr. Atkins' letter to Bríd Rodgers on 21 November and was as follows:

The elected representative body in Northern Ireland would then have ample opportunity to work out for itself the precise nature of its relationship with the Republic of Ireland in respect to those matters on which it has transferred responsibility.


D.M. Neligan

23 November 1979