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Talks at Stormont, 17 November 1980

Morning session (11.30-12.50)

Present during this discussion were, on the Northern Ireland side, Sir K. Stowe, Ambassador Figg, Messrs. M. Moriarty, J. Brelloch, I. Burns, D. Wyatt (NIO), B. Palmer (Central Secretariat), M. Newington (FCO). Present on the Irish side at this and all other parts of the meeting were Mr. Nally, Secretary to the Government, Mr. O'Rourke, Secretary, and Messrs. Neligan and Kirwan.

Stowe proposed that his side should give the latest information they had about the Long Kesh hunger strike. Mr. Brelloch said that the 7 hunger strikers were in reasonable health. They had been moved on 7 November into single cells in a wing of the prison separate from the blocks occupied by the general body of the protesting prisoners. This had been done to facilitate surveillance of their health. Since their removal, all 7 had been "co-operating fully" and had not disturbed their cells. (This seems to mean that they have not smashed their furniture or befouled their cells like those on the dirty protest). Each hunger striker had lost about 7-9 lbs.

Coincidentally with the start of the hunger strike the numbers on the dirty protest had risen to over 500, although 26 of that total had since abandoned their campaign. This increase in the numbers befouling their cells had necessitated a reshuffle in prison accommodation which however had proved manageable. 14 extra loyalists had gone on the dirty protest.

Asked how long the hunger strikers could be expected to survive, Mr. Brelloch said that normally after 60 days serious weakness could be expected though total abstainers from food had been known to survive up to 90 or 100 days. If no drink were taken death would supervene within 7 days.

10,000 people had taken part in the demonstration in Belfast on 26 October, which the authorities considered a surprisingly large number. They had expected about 5,000. Since then numbers had

been smaller and the RUC was coping easily with the situation. The Provisionals were not as yet manipulating the demonstrations and might be awaiting a falling-off in the number of participants before deciding to intervene. Brelloch repeated the British Government's approach based on two points, firstly that there was no case for granting political status to the prisoners. The authorities knew they had good support for this view. Secondly the Government was determined to maintain and improve prison conditions in a humanitarian way for all Northern Ireland prisons and prisoners. Improvements would be carried out over the next 12 months.

Mr. Ian Burns, describing the consequences of the hunger strike, said they felt the results of general security policy were good. There had been some rise in loyalist violence, but the authorities had caught more terrorists this year than previously. Cooperation with our police was working in a very satisfactory way. However, the IRA continued their attacks on part-time UDR and RUC members and their attacks against property. There was also the case of the indiscriminate murder of Mr. Walshe at Lislea, Co. Armagh recently which had not been admitted to but was undoubtedly an IRA crime. The level of these crimes had fallen since the hunger strike began but they carried on in some areas no doubt because of imperfect control over certain local units. The general Provisional objective must be at this time to get support for the protest.

Mentioning figures, Burns observed that 66 people had been murdered in 1980 up to end October (compared to 93 in 1979). There had been 654 people criminally injured compared to 919 in 1979 over the same period. These figures were about $\frac{1}{4}$ those of road traffic casualties. This security improvement made a difference in the morale of the security forces. 42 civilians and 22 members of the security forces, mostly part-timers, had died this year. 7 were victims of loyalist groups, the UVF or UFF. However more loyalists had been charged with terrorist crimes this year. The authorities believed that shortage of ammunition was a condition for many IRA units and this seemed to be the effect of the cooperative efforts of our Garda.

The new approach of giving more responsibility to the police and less to soldiers was continuing. As we knew the overall number of troops had been reduced and there were now proportionately more troops in Belfast and fewer elsewhere. Burns commented that public perceptions did not match the reality of the security improvement he had outlined, for instance the alarm felt in Co. Fermanagh because 6 people had been killed. Latterly, however, public attitudes had been better.

Mr. Nally suggested that the hunger strike was a last propaganda fling for the IRA. The hunger strike was seen as the main concern both North and South in Ireland. He enquired about communications with the prisoners. No one had seemed to know before the strike began how it might have been prevented. Stowe said that the Cardinal thought he knew but events proved that he didn't. He contrasted this failed approach with that of Mr. Hume who would not involve himself in any mediation effort unless he knew that the prisoners could accept.

Nally enquired what was political status as demanded by the prisoners. Brelloch replied that it seemed to mean prisoner of war status and as such was equivalent to the five demands as stated. Referring to the propaganda aspect, he pointed out that more than one side stood to gain or lose propaganda-wise. The Provisional IRA were very frightened of losing. The British authorities feared that the demand for political status, in the unlikely event of it being even half satisfied, would lead on to a demand for amnesty. Any propaganda success would of course lead to the recruitment of Catholics and would thereby become a practical success too.

Burns stated that the Provisional IRA had been reluctant to begin the hunger strike and were more than half convinced that it would fail. The Provisionals struggle had been moving down-hill over the last months and years and was now at a crisis.

Mr. Wyatt spoke about community reaction to the strike. In what he called a worst case scenario, Catholics would react by giving a

limited degree of support. He referred to the big turn-out at the Belfast and Coalisland demonstrations which showed significant community concern, though there had been an amount of bussing of rent-a-crowd demonstrators to these events. A humane regime in the jails would be tried and many variables were possible. It was necessary to convince people of the authorities' intentions in this regard. There had been some indiscriminate sectarian violence stimulated by UVF lunatics. The most alarming development would be that the Provisionals would provoke conflict between Catholics and the police and that this would in turn excite the loyalists to join in.

Mr. Nally asked if we could do anything in this situation. Brelloch said again that political status and the five demands of the hunger strikers were not on. It would be a very great tragedy if the demonstrations were to become a focus for violence. Everyone should strive to avoid this and in that way the underlying purposes of the hunger strikers would be defeated. Stowe advised against saying too much about the matter from outside the Northern Ireland jurisdiction. He hoped that nobody would speak out about possible grounds for mediation until they knew certainly in advance that what they were proposing would be on. Figg enquired whether the prisoners were in touch with the outside world. We were assured that this was so and that the cautionary message about intervention had been given by the authorities to Catholic community leaders and to Church leaders.

We explored the matter of Provisional IRA doubts about the campaign. It was confirmed that this was so and that the Provisionals also objected to the proposed hunger strike by women prisoners in Armagh. As regards the scenario for deterioration of the situation which had been sketched by Wyatt, it was confirmed that the police would be going light on Catholic demonstrations.

The Secretary reverted indirectly to the question of means of resolving the deadlock. He enquired whether the end game would come about in the British view through talks combined with improvements in conditions. Stowe replied that it was premature

to think in terms of mediation. All the evidence was that a moderate concession even when made close to the brink of the hunger strike commencing, had never been on. The concession on clothing had been insufficient. The best outcome might be a suspending of the hunger strike while something is worked out on conditions. He commented on the unique structure of the Northern Ireland prison population. Intervening on the same subject, Burns indicated that Brendan Hughes was the leader of the hunger strikers and that there would be no difficulty in getting a spokesman for them. The strikers communicate with other prisoners by shouting and tapping radiator pipes. One prisoner (apparently McKenna) seemed to be flinching somewhat. Burns said that normally after 60 days on strike (i.e. after mid-December) the men would be weak but not in coma. Stowe noted a suggestion by Neligan that, even if it were premature in the circumstances described to think of a mediator, the use be considered of some person having the confidence of the prisoners as a means of maintaining contact with them and probing their attitudes.

Luncheon

The persons named above were joined at luncheon by Mr. Ewart Bell, head of the N.I. Civil Service, Mr. K. Bloomfield, Secretary, Department of the Environment, Mr. N. Dugdale, Secretary, Department of Health and Welfare, Sir Francis Brooks-Richards, N.I. Security Co-ordinator and by Mr. Jack Hermon, Chief Constable of the RUC. After general conversation the Chief Constable was asked to give his assessment. He spoke about the general security situation in terms similar to those used earlier by Mr. Burns, that is indicating the improvement in the statistics for terrorist-related crime. He also confirmed the continued effective cooperation with the Garda at police level, which had played a considerable part in bringing about the improvement. The RUC had evidence that terrorist organisations generally, and in particular the Provisional IRA, were becoming more isolated within their communities. There was evidence of loss of interest by activists. In regard to the situation created by the hunger strike, the RUC would be watching with the greatest care for the first signs of Provisional involvement in the demonstrations, and would be at pains to contain the disruption and violence which that involvement

would be designed to set off. If the RUC failed in this task, the resulting civil disorder would achieve its aim of setting off a Protestant reaction on the streets. The security forces have never had to face both the Catholic and Protestant communities agitating at the same time since 1969. It would be a serious development and every effort would be made by the use of every resource available, i.e. including information methods, to avoid it.

Afternoon discussion

Same participants as at morning meeting with addition of Mr. Ewart Bell but in absence of Mr. Burns.

Stowe asked Mr. Palmer to give a run-down on the economic situation. Palmer first referred to the unemployment rate which was about 15% and over 90,000. The level of unemployment was a good deal higher in some places e.g. Strabane, Cookstown, and in west and central Belfast. In Belfast the actual number of unemployed was greater which added to the problem. In general the severity of this problem in Northern Ireland could be compared with certain localised positions in Britain. The burden achieved the dimensions indicated because of Government policy to reduce the rate of inflation and the public borrowing requirement. The fact was however that £48 million extra had been made available this year to Northern Ireland. In using resources, expenditure had been directed towards industrial development as an economic priority and away from areas like education and health which had been subjected to significant cuts.

Whereas public expenditure was on average receivable in Northern Ireland at a rate 35% higher per head of population than in Great Britain, in respect of housing in Belfast the rate was 50% above the average across the water.

Palmer noted the continuous rise in North/South trade, despite the economic difficulties, and also referred to cross-border cooperation. He mentioned the inter-Ministerial meeting between Mr. Goodhart and Mr. Connolly. In regard to the sums allocated from the Non-Quota Section of the European Regional Fund, Palmer noted that our programme had been submitted to Brussels. Northern Ireland was preparing similar documents, which they would be happy

to discuss with Dublin with a view to a coordinated approach.

Stowe referred to the vexed question of additionality in regard to the Non-Quota Section funds. He indicated that the Treasury was saying that the allocations from the Fund might be remitted to the District Councils. He also said that expectations were being built up about the effects of spending the Non-Quota Section money which were disproportionate to the sums involved. Preparation of projects should continue and he enquired whether a common brief might not be considered. Both sides would coordinate now and perhaps a joint brief would result. The work should be finished about the end of this month since there is a meeting of the Regional Policy Committee of the Commission later in December. Stowe suggested that a reference to the Non-Quota Section allocation might be made in the communiqué after the bilateral summit.

Similarly in regard to energy Stowe thought that a sentence in the communiqué might be merited. The Interconnector Working Party would meet on 21 November and although no date had been fixed he understood there was an expectation that Mr. Shaw and the Tánaiste might meet between now and the summit principally to discuss the gas question.

Political matters

Mr. Palmer left the meeting at this stage.

Introducing this central theme, Sir Kenneth observed that the hunger strike currently tended to dominate the situation. The discussion process inaugurated by the Secretary of State seemed to be leading to a mutual deadlock. Their expectations that some level of agreement might have emerged from the talks with the parties had not been realised and the British Government was now taking stock of the situation. They must avoid making things worse. Ministers in general still want a devolved assembly and an elected representative body and believed that this would be better than a political vacuum in which the parties adopted entrenched positions and where there was no movement. There would be nothing in the Queen's Speech. The British Government would

move cautiously afterwards. They would do nothing before the end of the year. They thought ideas might emerge after the meeting with the Taoiseach. In thinking about that meeting Stowe said that transfer of power to a local Northern Ireland Assembly still seemed to them a desirable objective which would facilitate rather than otherwise the consideration of the totality of relations between the two islands and the two parts of Ireland. He said there would be hostility to an unimaginative presentation of the new approach. Security and the hunger strikers affected the atmosphere. This affected the interests of the Republic also. They understood that what we were looking for was a conference. Perhaps we could agree at the next meeting that a conference should be prepared but it would be necessary to be very careful about how the idea would look to the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland (compare reaction to Mr. Hume's speech to the SDLP Conference).

We were now at the point of thinking and rethinking about the unique relationship between Britain and Ireland. Much of this relationship was unique, but this was the easy bit. Progress depended on time and the efforts of the working parties. For instance energy might be ripe for consideration by the two Heads of Government at their next meeting but one. However the stability of the North was a key part of relations between Dublin, London and Belfast. In this regard we should be aware that in the coming months there would be certain tensions. The 1981 District Council election would set Paisley and Molyneaux at one another's throats as the DUP felt that it had to equal Paisley's performance in the European Parliament election. In taking forward our ideas we must not help further to destabilise the position.

At this point Mr. Nally described our thinking on the issue of the conference, indicating the line which the Taoiseach would take and the public mood in this part of the country. Stowe enquired whether we would insist on reference to a conference or to something happening at the next meeting and whether we expected a resolution of the question at the December meeting. Mr. Nally replied that the framework for the fundamental discussions we sought should be right and the dressing-up of the framework was less important.

Stowe asked further whether the expression of our motive could be achieved in terms of suggestions that something significant would follow. Mr. Nally said we would concentrate on the objective. It was essential to work for the return of peace and stability in Northern Ireland and in both islands. Perhaps we could refer to a special meeting or a particular meeting. Moriarty said that that was acceptable and the Secretary stipulated that it should be distinguishable from the regular meetings already agreed to on 21 May. Newington remarked that a "conference" would hardly be deliverable.

Ambassador Figg suggested reference to a special meeting to discuss improvement in relations between both islands outside the routine meetings and with the participation of the Northern Ireland parties.

Stowe found this a bit optimistic. Speaking more generally he assured us that Mrs. Thatcher has thought much about the problem and would come to the meeting with her mind informed and purposely applied to the problem of Northern Ireland. He thought there were four possible levels at which the desired development could be referred to

- (1) a overt and specific reference to a special conference to discuss etc.
- (2) a special meeting in a series for the purpose of discussing etc.
- (3) the next meeting in the series would be specially devoted to discussing etc.
- (4) at their next meeting the Prime Ministers will discuss etc.

Having stated the intention the communiqué should lead on to the questions of the Northern Ireland parties and of special work in preparation.

Exchanges about our common concern for peace and stability followed. Mr. Nally suggested a reference to security between the two islands being considered in the context of general relationships. Stowe proposed "they noted the progress made in the level of security

cooperation between the two Governments". The Secretary suggested a discussion of "how, through a re-examination of relations between the two islands, peace and reconciliation could be advanced". Stowe, referring to the totality of relationships, proposed that references might be included to legal, economic, security, political and social relations. Legal would include extradition and political would mean constitutional. The Heads of Government agreed at their next meeting to discuss the way forward, or the two Heads of Government agreed to complete a fundamental review of relations etc.; these last two formulae might be useful if the areas to be studied were not to be specified. Newington suggested "structural" as an equivalent to constitutional. Stowe said that the points to be considered should be the substance of the work ordered by the two Heads of Government, and the purpose for which it was to be undertaken. Each would have different ideas as to the level of detail that would be appropriate in presentation, and a balance would have to be struck in that regard. He also suggested that the Heads of Government should review the results of all Ministerial contacts which would have taken place before their meeting.

At this stage, the Secretary proposed forms of wording which might be considered as follows:

The Prime Ministers agreed that a special meeting conference of the two Governments should be convened in 1981 in order to consider decide how, through a fundamental re-examination of the relations between all the parts of the two islands, progress can be made with the agreement of all the parties involved towards a solution of the present problems (or towards the restoration of peace and stability in Northern Ireland etc.)

or

to consider whether a solution to the present problems might be found in a fundamental re-examination of the relations between all the areas of the two islands.

Mr D'Rowe has mentioned to me that he did not in fact make a statement quite as full as this (which was a draft he had "in his pocket")

Stowe commented that agreement should further be reached also about preparations for the talks. The range of subjects and the priorities should be mentioned. For instance, energy would be a theme which would have value because it was not constitutional. A package of items broader than the merely constitutional should be made up. Security could be referred to in a balanced way in addition to the constitutional reference to "new institutional structures". Newington mentioned a possible legal heading, covering for instance citizens' rights, and a reference to defence, though this might be included with security. A possible financial heading might be explored.

The problem of involving the Northern Ireland parties was then once more addressed. Stowe saw a real difficulty in inviting their participation since, as he put it, the invitation cards would be returned. Our side referred to the desirability of making the Northern Ireland parties want to come to the conference. Ewart Bell commented that security references would help to sell the package to the Northern Ireland people. He also said that institutional structures as a topic should include consideration of how to develop dialogues between the parties and the Secretary of State. This would be a way of avoiding a refusal of the parties' invitations. Supporting this, Moriarty said the different Unionist parties would be vying with one another in intransigence. Stowe said we might bring together the various strands of thought so that when they next meet exploration might have been done enabling the Heads of Government to specify the work to be done. For this purpose, Mr. Nally suggested that an intermediate official contact might be arranged either at the Luxembourg European Council or through officials calling in at London on the way back. Agreeing to this, Stowe said that there were several bits to be done which he listed as follows:

- (a) exchange of ideas on the four levels which he had previously indicated
- (b) the range of subjects which the new initiative would cover
- (c) methods for preparing the discussions
- (d) the question of timing
- (e) the formulation of sentences for an outline of the communiqué

These points were noted, and the matter was left with the suggestion that a suitable contact would be arranged in London with the British side at official level.

Stowe made a final point relating to the arrangement of the bilateral summit meeting itself. He expressed the view that if the timing or location or other details of that programme were to be changed because of security difficulties the hunger strikers would have scored a major point.

In conclusion, there was some brief discussion of the agenda which resolved itself into the three points of Northern Ireland issues, bilateral issues and Community and international issues. As regards the ordering of the meeting, given the lack of correspondence between the functions of the Ministers who would be present, and the disparity in their numbers, it was suggested that they might profitably have a general discussion together during the period when the two Heads of Government would be having their tête-à-tête conversation.



21 November 1980