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Meeting with John Hume 25.1.1985

1. The main purpose of the meeting was to brief him in detail on the proposal made to us by the British on 21 January. I had also been asked to raise a matter which had arisen in his recent dinner meeting with the NI Secretary of State concerning possible talks with the Provisionals. Hume was in unusually good form despite his extensive recent travels and it was possible to have a relaxed, frank discussion.

2. Before I showed him the British document, he launched into an optimistic analysis of the present situation. The British, especially Mrs. Thatcher, were now giving NI a high priority and with the possibility of an early and, for her, victorious conclusion to the miners' strike it seemed possible that it might move up even higher on her agenda. The unionists were beginning to make some interesting noises and though their actions, especially at district council level, did not yet remotely correspond to those noises, it was at least possible now to contemplate the possibility of talks about talks. The Provisionals were obviously in some difficulties on the military side and Hume had a gut feeling that on the political side their support in minority areas might have peaked. People could not face the prospect of another generation and more of violence in their communities and the Provisionals could no longer hold out the possibility that all that was needed to get the British out of Ireland was one last, big heave. There were, of course, some negative elements, notably the breakdown of bipartisanship in the Republic. Overall, however, there were enough positive elements to justify real negotiations for the first time since Sunningdale.

3. He then asked about the British proposal and I showed him the document. He read it quickly and commented "it's not so bad". He read it again slowly and asked some questions about the background. I explained the nature of the meeting in London on 17 December and said that we had been expecting two sets of proposals viz. a minimalist one for which we would not have to pay a price and a maximalist one which would be framed in the context of a constitutional referendum. The British had, I said, described their proposal of 21 January as neither one nor the other but it was clear that it was not a proposal which required us to amend the constitution. He said "that's good" and went on to say that he did not think it had been a good idea to hold out that possibility to the British at any stage.

4. When I tried to tease out with him some of the main points in the British proposal - mainly on the basis of our annotated version of the document which I did not, however, have with me - he listened carefully but tended not to want to respond and I did not press him. The only significant comment he made was that in the event of devolved government in Northern Ireland, the British proposal seemed to envisage a very limited rôle indeed for the Irish Government. He asked what we now proposed to do - would we go into a series of meetings on the basis of the British proposal or would we put forward

our own proposal? I told him that no decision had yet been taken on that but that it was likely that one would have to be taken in the next week or ten days. There were tentative arrangements for an official level meeting between 4-11 February and an early meeting between the NI Secretary of State and the Minister for Foreign Affairs was also envisaged. When I pressed him a bit for his view on whether or not the document had enough to justify negotiating on it, he said he would like to give it very careful consideration over the next few days. He would be in Dublin on 31 January and would like to discuss it then.

5. He then returned to talking about the general situation and it is worth noting that his attitude remained generally optimistic. The ingredients for a package were there. It was a question of figuring out how and when to bring them together. There were obvious dangers in completely separate negotiations between on the one hand Dublin and London and on the other hand the NI parties. By and large he felt that a framework should be created by Dublin-London talks but that framework could hardly cover what he described as the central issue of the British "pushing the unionists". He thought that the British might now be prepared to do so but he felt that there was a far better chance of a unionist response after rather than before the May local government elections. When we discussed what exactly it was Hume wanted the British to do, he seemed to feel that the push would have to be mainly towards devolved government and that, in effect, the British would have to say that they were insisting on appointing a NI executive. Faced with the stark choice of taking it or leaving it, the unionists would turn to their supporters and say that in the new circumstances the best way of protecting the union was to go into the new devolved government. Hume felt that the Dublin-London talks could lead to the creation of a framework which would work equally well with or without unionist acquiescence.

6. When I asked him about the timing of all these moves, he said after some discussion that it was probably best to keep the Dublin-London talks going but without reaching a definite conclusion until after May. It might, however, be necessary to have some public show of progress before then to keep people's faith in the constitutional process. He did not, however, seem totally to exclude an Anglo-Irish summit in March/April from which a new framework would be announced. It was something to which he would wish to give some thought before he came to Dublin next week.

7. Our discussion on the issue of possible talks with the Provisionals was relatively short. The context in which it had arisen in his meeting with the NI Secretary of State was the possibility of inter-party talks in NI. Hurd had asked Hume how he would respond if, following an SDLP acceptance of the unionists invitation to talks, Sinn Féin announced that they too were prepared to talk. Hume confirmed to me what he had said to A/Sec Lillis viz. that he would offer to talk not to Provisional Sinn Féin but to those who really called the shots in the Provisional Movement, the Provisional Army Council. When I pointed out that the Sinn Féin constitution had no reference to any external group, he said that

"the constitution of the Republican Movement" was specific on that point and he referred me to a fairly recent book by Peter Taylor, "Beating the Terrorists? A Penguin Special 1980." (I have since checked the book and it contains an extract from an IRA Reorganisation Document said to have been found by the Gardaí in a flat in Dún Laoire where Séamus Twomey was arrested in 1977. The document is headed "Staff Report" and concludes with a paragraph which begins "Sinn Féin should come under Army organizers at all levels") He went on to say that the invitation to include the DUP in the New Ireland Forum in 1983 had put him in a position where he could not easily turn down talks with the Provisionals. The nationalist community in NI saw no difference between the violence of Paisleyism and that of the Provisionals and they would not understand how he could, on the one hand, be associated with an invitation to Paisley to participate in the Forum and on the other hand decline now to enter into talks with the Provisionals. I pointed to the obvious danger that if he showed a willingness to talk to the Provisionals at any stage, he might be providing an opening which the British would be very happy to use. He responded that there was the world of difference between a government talking to the Provisionals and a private citizen, even an elected representative, doing so.

8. My assessment of Hume's present position in relation to the Provisionals is that he is willing, even anxious, to have a confrontation, preferably public, with them. For the first time in a while, he seems to feel that he could significantly damage them in such a confrontation. He may very well be right, in Derry and west of the Bann terms, but I am doubtful that he could at this stage discredit people like Adams and the Provisional organisation in Belfast.

9. I told Hume that A/Sec Lillis would be in contact with him early in the week to arrange a Thursday or Friday appointment, probably at political level.

Seán Donlon

Seán Donlon
26 January 1985

cc. Taoiseach

Tánaiste

Minister for Foreign Affairs

Secretary to the Government

Secretary, Dept. of Justice

A/Sec Lillis