



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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2 April, 1992.

Mr. Sean O hUiginn,
Assistant Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs,
Dublin.

Dear Assistant Secretary,

I had lunch yesterday with Quentin Thomas, Deputy Secretary at the NIO. I was accompanied by Joe Hayes. The following points, arising from our conversation, will be of interest.

1. The Election

It is clear that the NIO are now giving serious thought to the prospect of a majority Labour Government with the possibility of Kevin McNamara as Secretary of State. Thomas referred to the constitutional convention here which allows Opposition parties during a General Election period to request factual briefing from Government departments. Neil Kinnock had availed of this in respect of some Departments of Government but it seems, from what Thomas said, that this did not extend to the NIO.

He referred to the timing of the post-election conference, scheduled for 23/24 April, remarking on the lack of time which this would allow for an incoming Secretary of State, particularly one with no previous experience of Government, to read himself in to the difficult task of chairing the inter-party talks. An inexperienced Chairman could, for example, say things with potential for great damage to the process. There were so many possibilities for misunderstanding especially in the security area.

Commenting on Brooke's interview in the 'Newsletter' on 31 March, Thomas characterised it as the Secretary of State speaking as a Conservative politician, an aspect of his personality with which none of us were too familiar. It was a message designed to help the NI Conservatives and it had even drawn grudging approval from Laurence Kennedy. Thomas emphasised that the NIO had no input. Peter Brooke continued to spend a lot of time in NI and had been doing some canvassing on the ground for the NI Conservatives - a task which, Thomas believed, he was undertaking with some reluctance. We expressed some surprise at certain passages - and to the repeated use of the term "Ulster".

2. The Talks

Thomas' concern with the limited time available before the 23/24 April meeting arises principally from the possibility that any tight parliamentary situation here may mean that negotiations about the

formation of a minority Government could extend right up to the opening of parliament on 27 April.

He also spoke about the possibility of extending the gap into August. He recalled the deliberations of the Business Committee of the first meeting of Strand One on 9 March. It was clear from that meeting that the Unionists are not in favour of following the format used for the election and having a second gap. As against this Paisley had indicated that he favoured a timetable which imposed some discipline and which prevented matters dragging on. The Unionists also made it clear that fears about the impact of the marching season were exaggerated. The SDLP representative, Denis Haughey he thought, had raised an objection to meetings in August for personal reasons (he had booked and paid for a family holiday). However, the meeting had concluded that all sides were prepared, if required, to be available in the event of a prolongation of the gap.

Thomas argued the need for flexibility. He recalled the situation at the breakdown of the last round when, very rightly, no agreement could be reached on "overtime". This time around, however, he felt that circumstances had changed and if both Governments could agree that it was desirable and necessary, provision should be made for a more flexible gap. He said that this seemed to have been accepted by our side at the last IGC in Dublin.

3. Scotland

Thomas noted that Molyneux at the meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council, in his usual circumlocutory way, had picked up on the debate between the parties and Scottish devolution. Thomas agreed that this would be the major constitutional issue after the election and could, in some measure, influence the context in which an incoming Government approached Northern Ireland.

There were few direct parallels between Scotland and Northern Ireland. Devolved political structures in Scotland did not, for example, require a forced power-sharing element. Nonetheless, models for dealing with Scotland would have implications for NI. Even if the Conservatives returned with a majority, the Scottish issue would not go away and the future of the Union, as a constitutional priority, would remain high on the agenda of the next parliament.

4. A hung parliament

If a situation emerged where either major party were dependent on the Unionists or the SDLP, John Hume and Ian Paisley could find their commitments to the European Parliament under threat. Thomas believed that few in the Conservative party would relish the prospect of being dependent on the Ulster Unionists. He found it hard to envisage any minor party voting down the Queen's speech and precipitating a second election.

5. Unionist attitudes

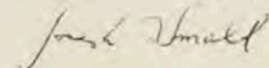
We had a fairly robust exchange on Unionist attitudes to the talks. I made the general point that history demonstrated that the Unionists had never voluntarily or willingly conceded anything and that an incoming Government might have to consider a "carrot and stick" approach. Thomas argued the need for both Governments to make allowances for Unionist concerns; to accept that people like Paisley had to say things which were negative and offensive as he had, for example, in his speech on the special NI debate on 5 March but which staked out the ground with his constituents and allowed him, as a result, the necessary freedom for manoeuvre in the talks. In Thomas' view the OUP and DUP accepted that they had no other option but to talk. The present Unionist leadership, however, were determined not to be seen by history as having sold out. The advantage in this for both Governments and for the SDLP lay in the certainty that anything that was agreed in the talks could be delivered by the OUP and the DUP. Dublin should make more allowances for this fact and respond accordingly.

I have detected the same essential argument in much of what Peter Brooke has said. Behind its basic political point, one can hear the balance of understanding for the Unionist viewpoint.

We made the point that if Paisley is serious about entering into an agreement, he should be trying to placate the wild elements among his supporters instead of adding to their extremism, as he did, for example, at his party's annual conference last autumn by using vitriolic language aimed at Dublin. There was evidence that the recent return to the negotiating table was partly attributable to a realisation on the part of the Unionist politicians that they were not fully in tune with the yearning of their supporters for political progress. Thomas agreed with this, adding that the Prime Minister's intervention was also helpful in that regard.

I expressed the view that the prospects for a positive outcome to the talks process would be increased if the message could be got across to the Unionists that failure could lead to an enhanced Anglo-Irish Agreement. Pressure from the British Government was required and it was very important not to mislead them on the Anglo-Irish Agreement by telling them, for instance, that the Anglo-Irish Agreement could be allowed to wither on the vine - a remark we were aware had been used by authoritative spokesmen. Thomas' reaction to this was that attempts to coerce either community did not work. I pointed out that we were not envisaging open threats or warnings in that regard but discreet, subtle messages from the British that would not be lost on the Unionist leadership. History had shown conclusively that it was only through direct action by, or pressure from, the British authorities (the reform and change in Northern Ireland were achieved. He seemed to accept that the Brooke process itself would hardly have materialised without the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Yours sincerely,



Ambassador