



**An Chartlann Náisiúnta**  
**National Archives**

**Reference Code:** 2021/102/40

**Creator(s):** Department of Justice

**Accession Conditions:** Open

**Copyright:** National Archives, Ireland.  
May only be reproduced with  
the written permission of the  
Director of the National  
Archives.

SECRET

Round-table Talks, Strand 1, Stormont  
Overview Note on Week ending Friday 15 May 1992

Mr Donoghue

1. A further four days of talks in Strand 1 of the process took place in Stormont this week and this note attempts to draw together an overview of the main points to emerge. The note comprises a day-by-day summary chronology and an assessment of the week from the SDLP's perspective. The note is based primarily on the daily debriefings I received from Denis Haughey, Sean Farren and Mark Durkan of the SDLP. The note is in supplement to the daily reports which I prepared on the week's four sessions.

Chronology

Monday, 11 May 1992

2. In a sense this was one of the most auspicious days in the entire process to date, in that it marked the tabling of the proposals of the four parties for new institutional structures for Northern Ireland. Proceedings began at Stormont shortly after 10.30 with a brief (13 minutes) Plenary Session, at which Secretary of State Mayhew announced that he had received the four sets of proposals, copies of which had been distributed to each delegation. He outlined the proposed procedure for the remainder of the week, viz that the Plenary would shortly adjourn, that parties would spend the rest of Monday in private consultations, that the Subcommittee mandated to examine the proposals in detail would meet on Tuesday and Wednesday and report back to a Plenary Session on Friday. Each party leader spoke briefly after Mayhew. At Molyneaux' suggestion, there was no substantive reference to the individual proposals - in advance of the Subcommittee discussion. John Hume's only comment was that there was a "fair distance" between the

parties. The Plenary adjourned at 10.45.

3. As regards the proposals themselves, we received, as you know, a full set from the SDLP on Monday afternoon and these have been circulated. It was the SDLP proposal which attracted most attention. Based on an EC-type structure, it called for a six-member Commission comprising three directly elected Commissioners and three members appointed respectively by the British and Irish Governments and the EC Commission. This would be complemented by a separate elected Assembly and by a North/South Council of Ministers which would have as its remit the overall development of relationships between both parts of the island. The proposals of the DUP and UUP were a considerable disappointment. In essence along similar lines to each other and bearing clear signs of close co-ordination, both called for an Assembly which would elect Committees to oversee and administer devolved matters. Both specifically ruled out an executive body and neither addressed the key SDLP issue of reflection of the Nationalist identity. The DUP paper was lengthier and more tightly argued (Robinson 's drafting skills being evident). Nonetheless, the essence was the same as that of the UUP's - no power-sharing and no Irish dimension. A particular disappointment in both papers was the absence of new thinking; both papers drew heavily on positions drawn up by them for the Prior Assembly of the early eighties. The Alliance paper was also a disappointment, with no serious attempt to address Nationalist concerns. It called for an Assembly, with a small Executive drawn from and responsible to it, but appointed, in accordance with specified criteria, by the Secretary of State.
  
4. Parties spent most of the remainder of the day in private conclave. The SDLP did, however, at their request have a short meeting with Mayhew to press for an early move to Strand 2. Accompanied by the three other MPs, Hume argued forcefully that further discussion in Strand 1

would be "reduced to footwork" until the Talks moved to Strand 2; the sooner the Talks moved to this Strand, therefore, the better. Mayhew asked "what form the Irish Government's 'generosity'" was likely to take in Strand 2. Mallon, who met with Assistant Secretary O hUiginn and myself on Monday afternoon, told us that he replied to Mayhew that if he believed that the Irish Government would make concessions lightly he was "living in cloud cuckoo land"! Whatever gains the Unionists made in Strand 2 would be at a high price, "payable in Strand 1", Mallon told Mayhew.

Tuesday, 12 May 1992

5. This was taken up with the Subcommittee discussion of the four proposals. It was the first substantive exchange between the parties on the proposals. It was a tense and difficult day, in the SDLP view, easily the most difficult since the process began. The format agreed was that each paper would be taken in turn, that of Alliance and the SDLP on that day and that of the DUP and UUP the next day. At the outset, however, before the meeting had moved to the formal consideration of proposals, Peter Robinson (DUP) launched into a tirade against the SDLP paper, describing it as "absurd", a "betrayal", "not serious" and in contravention of the intent and spirit of the statement of 26 March 1991. He said that its implementation would "mean war in the Province" and the "end of the Union".
6. The Subcommittee then began an examination of the Alliance paper. Both the SDLP and DUP forcefully pointed up the serious drawbacks attaching to having the Executive dependent for support in the Assembly, arguing indeed that such an approach was "unworkable". The UUP dismissed the proposal as a "high wire act".
7. The SDLP paper was next to be taken. In a discussion that lasted almost three hours, the three SDLP representatives - Haughey, Farren and Durkan - received

an intense "grilling" from the UUP, DUP and Alliance delegates. Robinson was particularly to the fore, repeating the charges he had made at the outset. In a number of sharply worded interventions, he claimed that the proposals "offended against sovereignty", was totally unacceptable to the Unionist community and among its "absurdities" was the possibility that one could have the "Dublin Commissioner" sitting down to argue economic development with his Dublin counterpart, thereby in Robinson's view giving major advantage to the South in an area where the two parts of Ireland were in competition. Empey (UUP) made an emotive and intemperate intervention, describing the SDLP proposals as "offensive", "alien" and involving - in the appointed Commissioner proposal - the introduction into Northern Ireland of "all sorts of Hitlers and dictators from outside". Close (Alliance) argued that the proposals could never be acceptable to the Unionist community. Minister of State Jeremy Hanley, chairing, raised a question about the European involvement, asking was it reasonable to give "Europe a sixth of the power". The British side also raised a number of - in the SDLP view obtuse - questions about control of security and about funding.

Wednesday 13 May 1992

8. The Subcommittee resumed its discussion of the party proposals on Wednesday morning under the shadow of the controversy surrounding the leaking of the SDLP paper to the "Irish Times" - who published the actual proposals, but not the preamble and concluding section of their paper that morning - and the BBC. At the outset of Wednesday's meeting, Denis Haughey made a strong protest about the development, which he characterised as a serious breach of faith and of the the terms of the agreement of 26 March. Other delegations added words of condemnation (the strong suspicion was that the "leaker" was a "disgruntled fringe member" of the UUP team).
9. The Subcommittee then continued with the examination of

the proposals for new institutions. It was now the turn of, respectively, the UUP and DUP to defend their papers. The SDLP launched strong attacks on both, particularly their failure to address in any meaningful way the key issue of reflection of the Nationalist identity. The SDLP also exposed the limitations of a system, proposed by the DUP and UUP, which did not include an executive branch. They discomfited the Unionist representatives also on the issue of collective responsibility. Empey, for the UUP, had a particularly difficult time defending proposals which his own heart did not appear to be in. Robinson too was under pressure on several issues. He eventually implicitly conceded the case for some kind of executive arm, saying "if that is how it develops you can then say you brought us to that point". Later, in what the SDLP believe may yet prove a costly slip of the tongue, Robinson derided the presence of one Commissioner nominated by the Irish Government as "insignificant" in terms of reflecting the Irish identity of the Nationalist community. Durkan of the SDLP responded that the previous day Robinson had claimed the SDLP proposal represented "the end of the Union", while now he was dismissing it as "insignificant".

10. The substantive discussion for that day closed with an intervention - a controversial one in Unionist eyes - by Haughey on the nature of the Irish identity of the Nationalist community. The last 90 minutes of the day - after tea - was given over to consideration of the draft report to Plenary of the Subcommittee prepared by the British side. This, as expected, attempted to paint up the level of "common ground" identified. The SDLP were unhappy with its overall tone, but were able to secure sufficient amendments to enable them to "live with" the document. -

Friday, 15 May 1992

11. This was another critical day, marking the first substantive Plenary since the tabling of the proposals



and also the first since the controversial leaking in mid-week of the SDLP proposals. The day began with a meeting between Mayhew and the party leaders. The leak issue was raised and condemned by all. There was a sharp exchange on the matter between Hume and Molyneux. Paisley said that before proceeding any further he wished to have the Subcommittee recalled to discuss Denis Haughey's intervention in the committee on Wednesday regarding the Irish identity of Nationalists (see para 10 above); the DUP regarded Haughey's remarks as a "challenge" and wished to have an opportunity in the Subcommittee to respond. It was accordingly agreed that the Subcommittee would reconvene, which it did - meeting for 45 minutes.

12. At that meeting of the Subcommittee, the DUP - supported by the UUP and Alliance - claimed that Haughey's point that the Irish identity of the Nationalist community required, as of right, a political role for the Irish Government in the "internal affairs of Northern Ireland" was "going further than Sunningdale and the Anglo Irish Agreement" and represented a "new and fundamental changing of the goal posts". The sense of the SDLP delegation was that the Unionist line was essentially tactical - that they were setting down markers which, if necessary, they could later collect and use as a basis for leaving the Talks.
  
13. This meeting was followed at 1.45 by a further meeting between Mayhew and the party leaders to agree the terms of a short Plenary to be held immediately afterwards. The Plenary duly convened at 2.15. It discussed first the leak affair, with all sides repeating their condemnation. In introducing the item and setting its context, Mayhew referred to "these constitutional Talks which will shape the future of Northern Ireland" (a formulation which caused Paisley, apparently to "bristle"). Mayhew said that they were not "going to reward the perpetrator (of the leak) by allowing the

Talks to be interrupted". He added that the person responsible "should not assume that their identity will not become known". Turning to substantial matters, Mayhew said that the fundamental issues put forward in the papers must now be addressed. There was a "very considerable degree of contrast between proposals". He praised the work of the Subcommittee but said that negotiation of "these important issues" could only take place in Plenary. It was agreed that Plenary discussion would commence on Monday (18 May) and continue into Tuesday (and if necessary Wednesday). The Plenary then adjourned.

14. The final meeting of the week was a drafting session of the Subcommittee to agree the formal summary minutes/records of the ten meetings of the group since its inception (7 May). The discussion lasted almost two hours and there were extensive exchanges between the parties on several points. Denis Haughey gave me a set of all ten documents as they stood at the end of the meeting; a number require some further amendment. The final versions of all ten should be available shortly.

Assessment of the week from SDLP perspective

15. The SDLP feel that the week has been easily the most critical of the process so far. The formal tabling of proposals for the future of Northern Ireland on Monday was something of an historic occasion for the SDLP and the other parties. For the SDLP, it was a particularly crucial occasion. Their proposals are radical and not without considerable risk. In particular there was a danger in advance of the tabling of the proposals that they would be labelled "not serious" or "outlandishly unrealistic". In the event, the leaking of the SDLP's proposals - and their reproduction in the "Irish Times" - represented an unlikely and, from the viewpoint of the likely leaker, ironic breakthrough: instead of "outlandish" most of the epithets used in press commentary were of the order of "far-reaching",



"radical", "fresh thinking", "innovative" etc. A first and vital hurdle had been passed.

16. Equally significant, in the SDLP view, is the fact that in the wake of the submission of their (the SDLP's) proposals the Unionists are still at the table! Certainly, the reaction of the Unionist representatives in the Subcommittee on Tuesday and Wednesday was predictably vitriolic. If they were looking for an opportunity to withdraw "with honour" - as they have said they would if they believed that the Union was fundamentally threatened - then this was surely it. The fact that they did not withdraw at that point nor at the Plenary session on Friday, the first following the Subcommittee's run-through the proposals, is seen by the SDLP as marking an important development in these Talks. Denis Haughey and Sean Farren believe that it highlights the nature of the Unionists' dilemma - the fear on the one hand of proceeding with a process which has already established how dangerous it could be for them, versus the fear on the other hand of the consequences of withdrawing from the Talks and being left with the blame for their collapse.
  
17. Clearly the gap between the two sides, notwithstanding the fact that the process has ultimately overcome every hurdle so far, remains enormous. The next period is crucial - every day in a sense a "cup final" - with both sides acutely conscious of the ever increasing nature of the stakes. For the SDLP now, a major challenge is to convince the Unionists - and the British - to engage seriously on their proposals and to convince both of the advantages to everybody of the path being proposed - the historic opportunity for a new beginning etc. (In practice, this may mean some modification of their Commission proposal, without, of course, sacrificing on the fundamental principle.) It remains to be seen how receptive the SDLP's "audience" will be to such an approach. Another key and related objective for the

SDLP, of course, will be to convince the Unionists of the value and need - even in their terms - of moving now to Strand 2. Here too, it is unclear at the time of writing how the Unionists are going to handle such a line.

17. One other crucial question remaining unanswered so far, is where the British stand. A worrying development for the SDLP in the Subcommittee during the week was the extent to which Jeremy Hanley, and his NIO team, seem taken by Peter Robinson and the DUP paper. The SDLP said that it was very clear, both from actual remarks passed and the "body language" of the sessions, that the British side (at least from Hanley down) regard the DUP's as the "best" paper and Peter Robinson as the "star pupil". By contrast, they are clearly uncomfortable with aspects at least of the SDLP paper. It is a discomfort which for the most part seems born out of lack of comprehension. Robinson and the DUP seem more "familiar", the SDLP's approach too radical and untried. A crucial missing factor in this equation is the attitude of Mayhew himself. In the view of Seamus Mallon and other members of the party to whom I spoke during the week, Mayhew has not yet revealed his hand, either about the SDLP paper, or about whether he is serious about forging a fundamental settlement. In that regard, they noted his formulation on Friday "these constitutional talks which will shape the future of Northern Ireland". The SDLP do not wish to read too much into one remark but they certainly regard it as interesting. The coming week may reveal more about where Mayhew stands.
  
18. What is clear is that these Talks have reached an historic juncture. For the SDLP the past seven days have taken them into new, uncharted territory. After all the shadow boxing, this is now the real thing. In the event, it was the backroom team (Haughey, Farren and Durkan) who were first into the fray. They all found the experience stimulating and exciting - if a little daunting at times.

Overall they feel that they give a reasonable account of themselves. With the positive public and media reaction to their proposals (together with the strong support being signalled from the party grassroots) behind them, the week has given the SDLP a very considerable fillip, both as a party and in terms of boosting the delegation ~~for~~ for the difficult and critical period immediately ahead.

gac

T O'Connor  
17 May 1992