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Discussion with John Chilcot (NIO) - 30 June, 1992

1. I had a private informal discussion with John Chilcot, Permanent Under Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office, during the lunch in London on 30 June before the meeting in Strand Three formation. The following points of interest emerged.
2. Chilcot said that the British view at present is that the problem of working out a settlement is very much one between the Unionists and ourselves. The British Government, for its part, has no detailed blue print for the future of the island. This must really be settled between us and the Unionists. A settlement may require great change on the part of the Unionists but also on the part of the South.
3. He laid stress on the openness of the Prime Minister and on the confidence which a new electoral mandate gives to the British Government. He also spoke of the much greater sophistication of the British administration in its understanding of Northern Ireland today compared with the situation at the time of Sunningdale in 1973/74. He feels that Mayhew has less intuitive understanding of the problems and attitudes of the minority than his predecessor, Peter Brooke, but Mayhew does understand the situation intellectually.
4. Chilcot emphasised the strong public pressure for a settlement on all politicians and his own sense that the Provos are taking the present talks seriously and are worried about them. He takes quite seriously some recent indications from that quarter of a willingness to get off the hook of violence - more so he thought than does Mayhew.

5. While in the British view the real challenge is to the Irish Government and to the Unionists to see how far we can go to reach a settlement, present British thinking in outline would involve:


- (a) An Assembly of some kind in Northern Ireland providing an adequate role for the minority together with other arrangements such as Bill of Rights etc.
- (b) An institutionalised North/South link which could be fairly strong.
- (c) As part of a settlement, a change in Articles Two and Three of the Constitution.
- (d) An end to violence.

6. In response, I suggested that, in thinking on these lines, he was overlooking two important points:

- (a) no Irish Government could take such a major initiative as going for a referendum on Articles Two and Three unless it were part of the outcome of a very "deep" settlement. His answer was to emphasise the potential of the proposed North/South link and beyond this to revert again to the openness to whatever the Unionists and ourselves could work out of which he had spoken earlier
- (b) the worst course for all of us now would be to put a fragile structure in place which would appear to offer hope of a real settlement but which could soon collapse under its own weight. To this he responded that the PIRA are very worried by present developments and that they would want in at some

point. In his view, even structures which were fragile at the outset could become stronger and develop as time went on.

7. I said I thought the situation now emerging is that the Unionists are talking themselves into a situation where they will not be able to go into a settlement without change in Articles Two and Three; on the other hand change of such magnitude could only be contemplated by any Irish Government as part of a really deep and lasting settlement. It seemed, therefore, that we are fated to go for a really deep settlement or else not to succeed in the present talks. Chilcot did not disagree. Indeed, he seemed to welcome the idea that it is now up to both the major elements on the island - Unionists and Nationalists - to face the fundamental problem and reach an accommodation which will require substantial movement on both sides.
8. Chilcot knows that this kind of outcome could not be achieved in one go before the end of July but would require several periods of negotiation. As to the present phase, he thinks we should open Strand Two of the process and have several meetings so as to secure engagement on all sides. We should have something also in Strand Three and then, since everyone is tired, adjourn for the month of August with some kind of "soft landing" arrangement which would allow resumption in the Autumn.

  
N. Dorr  
Secretary  
1 July, 1992.

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