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Meetings with the British Government
Belfast, 6 November

1. The Tanaiste and the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Justice met the Secretary of State and Minister Hanley for a half-hour discussion on the morning of 6 November. A further brief meeting took place over lunch-time. Officials attended on both sides in each instance.
2. Opening the morning meeting, the Secretary of State said that the British Government's preference would be for the process to continue with interruption. He felt that real progress had been made, especially in recent weeks, and that draft Heads of Agreement remained a possibility. However, this would now not happen, not least because of the Conference meeting on 16 November to which the two Governments were lined up.

The Irish Government were entitled to call for this meeting and the British Government would be there. The Unionists, however, had told him that, once the gap was over, the talks would be over. They had indicated that, if the Conference went ahead, they could not hold their own people (who, according to Paisley, were in a "state of enagement"). Paisley and Molyneux had told him in the Commons on Thursday that they wanted more talks that these would have to be new talks and could not be a continuation of the present process. They also indicated (with Paisley saying so "more strikingly") that there could be no new talks without progress on Articles 2 and 3.

With the talks likely to end either because of the Conference or because of the Irish election, it was important to secure a "bed" to give the best prospect of future talks with the same objective. He hoped that a form of words might be agreed as the "core" of what each participant might wish to say when the talks ended. British and Irish officials had met on Thursday and had produced a draft statement.

3. The Tanaiste said that he would prefer the disruption of the talks to be attributed to the Irish election. He agreed that it was essential that some kind of ground plan be laid for a resumption of talks. It was unlikely that anyone would be available at Ministerial level on the Irish side between now and Tuesday (as selection conventions would be taking place over the weekend and the Minister for Foreign Affairs would be in Brussels on Monday). It was a fact, therefore, that the talks would be disrupted by the election in the period up to Tuesday. He would not welcome pressure on Irish Ministers to attend on Monday and Tuesday and, should they find this impossible, suggestions that they were responsible for the breakdown of the talks.

4. The Secretary of State said they were both agreed that the process should end for the time being with as little recrimination as possible. The Unionists were entitled to continue till Tuesday evening if they wished to. He would face considerable political pressure in the Commons if he appeared willing to bring the process to an end as long as Unionists wished to continue it.

The Tánaiste said that Irish Government officials would certainly be available on Monday and Tuesday.

5. On the Conference meeting, which the two Governments had agreed should take place on 16 November, the Secretary of State warned that the Unionists would "make something of it". While he would not make any statement to the effect that the holding of the Conference was regrettable, he suggested that even the UUP would be unsympathetic (because of the forthcoming Conference) to an argument that Irish Ministers were prevented by the election campaign from attending the talks next week. The Unionists would recall that they themselves had been ready at all stages to continue the talks (including in August, when others were going on holiday). They would want to be seen to be going "up to the wire" on Tuesday evening.
6. The Minister for Foreign Affairs noted that the Secretary of State had made a number of important points:

- (i) There would be no recriminations between the two Governments about the holding of the Conference, which had been decided between the two Heads of Government.
- (ii) The Unionists would not leave the talks on the basis of the Irish election but wished to adhere to their original position that the holding of the Conference would bring the talks to an end.
- (iii) Our purpose should now be to work for an "intermission" or "soft landing".

He commented that it was unfortunate that the talks had not moved into the bilateral mode earlier.

7. The Secretary of State reiterated his view that it would be helpful if an Irish Minister could attend on Tuesday. An alternative approach would be for the Irish Government to indicate its readiness to postpone the Conference in view of the election campaign.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that the decision on the holding of the Conference was immutable. The Secretary of State said "OK - if it is not available, we will not spend any more time on that". The Minister for Foreign Affairs accepted that it would be helpful if a

Minister could attend on Tuesday and indicated that the Government would reflect on this.

8. Turning to a possible "bridging" device (or "loop" around the Conference meeting), the Secretary of State suggested that the right formula on Articles 2 and 3 would persuade the Unionists to return to the talks. He believed that the SDLP had a key role to play in this respect. He felt that, while Hume would have settled for a formulation which would have "done the trick", Mallon was "the difficulty". He suggested that Irish Ministers should establish today with the SDLP where they stood in this matter. If "we could turn this hinge", everything else would be opened up.

Fell said that the British side had had various contacts with the DUP over the past week. They were surprised by the DUP's willingness to find their way back into an overall agreement (given that at an earlier stage the DUP had seemed intent on wrecking the process). He felt that, for electoral reasons, the DUP would eventually come into the kind of agreement towards which the SDLP and the UUP had been heading in their recent bilaterals.

Chilcot suggested that the apparently universal support for bilaterals (including from the DUP) might provide the "bridge" sought by the Minister for Foreign Affairs. The Tanaiste pointed out that his suggestion via the Chairman for a bilateral with the DUP had met with no success.

9. The Secretary of State commented that, if the Irish Government could produce the "necessary change" in its position on Articles 2 and 3, this would also be an important "bridge" or "loop around" to future talks. He again urged Irish Ministers to explore this matter with the SDLP. The Tanaiste replied that he was unaware of the dichotomy of view within the SDLP to which the Secretary of State had referred.

The Secretary of State claimed that Hume had been willing to accept a particular formulation but that Mallon had "put a brake" on this willingness. He suggested that Mallon had done this because of his own strong desire to see North/South institutions given complete responsibility for security. It would be helpful if the Minister for Justice (NB The Minister was not present during this discussion) were to indicate to Mallon that it was impractical to imagine that responsibility for the British Army could be handed over. It would be a great pity if Mallon were to insist on something as unrealistic as this.

10. The meeting then adjourned.
11. There was a further brief meeting with the Secretary of State, at the latter's request, following the Heads of Delegation meeting at midday.

The Secretary of State said he had heard that the UUP were likely to put forward "quite detailed Heads of Agreement" on Monday/Tuesday. It was all the more important to try to get the SDLP "on one tack" in relation to Articles 2 and 3 - as otherwise the "shutters would come down" after the UUP had produced their new paper.

12. Mentioning that he had had an earlier indication to this effect from Maginnis, the Tánaiste said that we did not know what would be in the UUP paper or how we would react to it. All Maginnis had told him was that there might be "something extra" (to what had been discussed bilaterally with the Irish Government).

The Minister for Justice said that this development made it all the more important for the process to be brought to an end today. There was no way in which discussion could be advanced by Monday/Tuesday to the point of finalising an agreement. Furthermore, any point-scoring effort by the UUP at this stage was hardly conducive to a successful outcome. It would be better if things ended now in advance of the presentation of this paper.

It was not too much to ask the British Government to seek the support of all delegations for an intermission. Irish Ministers could persuade the SDLP - could the Secretary of State do likewise with the others? The Irish Government's position of willingness to return to talks in 3-4 weeks time was entirely reasonable.

As regards Articles 2 and 3, he asked if the Secretary of State thought it possible for a major political party, which had taken a particular stance on this issue over a period of several months, to change tack suddenly in the middle of an election campaign.

13. The Secretary of State replied that this was for Irish Ministers to judge. The DUP had indicated to him that a decision by the Irish Government to exchange "would" for "could" would put us all into a new ball-park. We could not afford to throw away this card.

The Minister for Justice wondered what purpose would be served if, for example, Heads of Agreement were worked out by Tuesday and a different Irish Government were in office in a few weeks time. It would be better if the British Government were to join with Irish Ministers in accepting that a suspension of the talks now in the light of the election was a reasonable request.

The Secretary of State replied that he could not say that he was with the Irish Government, and therefore against the Unionists, in relation to a continuation until Tuesday.

The Minister for Justice warned about possibility of

recriminations following a breakdown on Tuesday which would be prejudicial to future talks.

The Tánaiste mentioned that it was the Conference rather than Articles 2 and 3 which Maginnis had earlier highlighted to him as the problem from the Unionist point of view. The Secretary of State again confirmed that the Conference would go ahead, that he was not going to propose anything different, that he would be there and that he would engage in no recriminations about it. What was at issue, however, was the resumption of talks and the question of Articles 2 and 3.

14. The Minister for Foreign Affairs commented that the Secretary of State was perhaps being over-optimistic about the signals emerging from the SDLP/UUP bilaterals. The Tánaiste observed that Paisley had had the effrontery to talk about "working up to the wire" when the DUP had refused bilaterals with the Irish Government. The Secretary of State indicated some sympathy with the Irish position but suggested that the "profound inadequacy" of the Unionist participants should not be allowed to wreck the process.

DD

David Donoghue
10 November, 1992