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Confidential

Meeting between the Taoiseach and Prime Minister Major  
26 February 1992

Discussion at dinner in Downing Street

During the tete-a-tete of about an hour and a half at Downing Street between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Justice met separately at NIO with Mr. Brooke and Dr. Mawhinney. Following this, the full delegations on both sides came together over dinner in Downing St.

The following is a reconstruction from notes. It is not a verbatim account.

Prime Minister Major The three strand talks have come to a temporary halt. Would you like to say something Peter?

Mr. Brooke Looking back on the whole development before March 1991, from April to the 3rd of July and what has happened since including a meeting with the Party Leaders here on 11 February I can give a verdict as it has been up to now. Some of those involved in the short period of discussion in Summer last year (i.e. opening of strand 1) said it was the best discussion ever. They were speaking like politicians engaged in real dialogue.

The encouragement I derive from what has happened since is that there is now a wide sense of "ownership" among the forty or so politicians who took part. By that I mean a sense of involvement, both intellectual and emotional.

There have also been meetings chaired by Brian (Mawhinney) recently which were addressed by senior officials and which gave briefing on Government, on finances and so on. Every Party turned up and those present asked intelligent questions and wanted to go on. Next Thursday there will be another round on Local Government. This is an extension of the sense of "ownership" which derived from the talks.

As to the next stage I have retained faith in the seriousness and good sense of the Parties. They have emerged from each test with a common position. We have learned that it takes them a long time to do it however. I am concerned about their having sufficient time and not being rushed. There are also questions of geography as well as the underlying history on both sides. Two of them are MEPs and they are not alone absent at times in Strasbourg or London but in places as far as Romania and South America. This is a complication. Therefore we have to allow time.

However I am absolutely confident that they will come back.

Taoiseach The European Parliament is the one to be in!

Brooke Yes I am afraid it has been something of a foxhole (i.e. a hide out)!

Taoiseach We appreciate the effort. We are fully committed to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the talks. We would even want to add something to that. History has dealt us a terrible legacy. It has lasted now for twenty-two years. I live thirty-five miles from the border. I know the situation. I know the people there on both sides. People from both sides have worked for me. There is an excellent work ethic on both sides. If only they could find a structure (under which to live). There are twenty-one year old people there who know nothing else except the conflict. We must however play the hand of cards we have been dealt.

Brooke Yes I think that is a very important point. We must deal with reality. I have great sympathy for both sides. Each side has its historical imperatives. We must get a resolution where neither side is dramatically a winner.

Major (Turning to Brooke) What do you see as the end product?

Brooke Insofar as the talks are concerned Mr. Molyneux and his colleagues do want an opportunity to talk in strand one and there will be discussions in strand two. If we can emerge from that with a basis for Government in Northern Ireland which is different and a North/South relationship which is different from the present and if the Unionists endorse that there will also be consequences for the London-Dublin relationship. The purpose would be a resolution and a settlement where everyone is content and where there are trade-offs. The constitutional politicians of these islands would have put their thumb print on it - so that the paramilitaries on either side, if they went against it, would be doing so against all logic and reason (Note: Mr. Brooke's answer was not particularly coherent and he gave no real answer to the Prime Minister's question about the end product beyond more or less paraphrasing the framework of the talks).

(Mr. Brooke went on to mention his discussions with the Minister for Foreign Affairs during the tete-a-tete between the two Heads of Government.)

Minister for Foreign Affairs Yes, we discussed a lot. I would be guided by him about the Conference next week.

Brooke I would like to pay tribute to the architects of the Agreement, some of whom are here. It is a remarkable structure within which to do business.

Minister for Justice I had discussions with Brian (Mawhinney). He was very supportive of what we have been doing with limited resources in the security area. This has an enormous impact on our resources. It means we commit huge resources which we do not have. We will not be found wanting. We arranged a meeting to further that. We are hoping that the talks next week may become more substantial. The need is for political and economic development to be underpinned by decent security.

Mawhinney I told Pádraig (Flynn) (Minister for Justice) that we are appreciative of the support received. If he would like a security briefing we would arrange that in Dublin or Belfast - perhaps better in Belfast.

Major When we meet next in London we could examine the question of whether we should have a security briefing.

Taoiseach Yes we can do that.

Mawhinney As regards the talks, the amount of testing we applied to the parties' commitment to the three strand approach was considerable. There was at the outset the traditional Unionist scepticism about whether the SDLP are ready to be serious about strand one. There was also SDLP scepticism about whether the Unionists would be serious about strand two. We tested this and we can say now that there is a general commitment to the three strand process.

Taoiseach Time is not on our side. It has been going on for twenty-two years. I tend to get impatient. I look to see a very simple objective approach. The longer you deal with something like this the more you become part of the problem. There have been 3,000 deaths already. How do we find a way to take away the ordinary people who succour violence or give it some support? People who have done so for twenty-two years?

Brooke Unless you have confidence that right is going to win, then you will fear to take the side of right (i.e. unless people who give passive support to violence know that it will not succeed they will hedge their bets).

Minister for F.A. We have tried to reassure the Unionists that we are people they can trust. Already we have met the SDLP and Kevin MacNamara. We invited the Unionists to meet us anywhere. Is there any hope they would do so? What more can we do? How do we set up an atmosphere of trust?

Brooke If you try to hurry it you are more likely to delay it. Again I would pay tribute to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. But four years afterwards it produced political sterility. The Unionists were in a cul de sac. If you play the game in such a way as to send them back then you will spend the time frustrated and there will be no progress. Having got them out into the open country, to use a military metaphor, you have to keep them out.

Taoiseach I won't be found lacking in courage. I would rather try and fail than not try at all.

Brooke That is all to the good. But I have a sense that things have to go at a pace which people are capable of accepting. I am speaking not of one but of both traditions. This applies to John Hume too. He too has to lead his people. Unless they all carry their constituents with them we will not have a deal.

One contribution both Governments can make would come once you have narrowed the gap so that it is capable of being bridged. Then the two Governments should build a bridge.

Taoiseach Yes I agree.

Brooke You cannot do it however when there is a very substantial gap.

Taoiseach I sat in the lobby of a hotel in Belfast in 1970 and talked to people who could not have known that it would go on for twenty or twenty-two years. We have seen things change greatly in Europe. This is the last bit - surely it's not beyond all our efforts to address it.

Minister for F.A. Suppose they don't bridge the gap? Suppose they are not ready to cross the Rubicon? What happens if the talks process comes to an end and the three strand approach ceases to function? Do the two Governments then take over?

Brooke If it is demonstrated that it is incapable of finishing then you have to do something else. But you need to allow it to happen first.

Major Otherwise they will retreat back and claim that the talks were not given a proper opportunity for success.

Mawhinney For seventy years the Unionists said they would never "sit down with the Irish". Now there are very positive signs that they are willing to do so (i.e. on strand two). This is a historic shift. It is being driven by an increasing perception on the part of ordinary people of the need for this.

Taoiseach That is my experience too.

Mawhinney This pressure from the ordinary people is keeping real pressure on the politicians. To my mind the 20th anniversary of the arrival of the troops in Northern Ireland was a psychologically important "change point" in public perception. As I see it significant movement dates from then. We are trying to devise other "change points".



Taoiseach If you look back seventy years the policies envisaged then (i.e. in the Government of Ireland Act re the role of a Council of Ireland) are now coming from Europe. How can we input that situation into Northern Ireland to pick up wherever you leave off?

Brooke The economists from outside would see it as extraordinary that trade between North and South in Ireland is so small due to the incubus of partition. This will change with the development of the EC but not by 1993.

Major It has been very useful to have had these exchanges. What about the EC side?

Minister Garel-Jones The EC is bringing us together. If I may quote the Prime Minister it is bringing us "into the heart of Europe". We are taking more trouble now to talk to our partners (in preparation for the British EC Presidency in July). I will be meeting my opposite number (Minister of State Kitt) on Monday next.

As I travel around the Community I always uncover areas where we can work together. The post-Maastricht European development will bring us together. For our Presidency we have identified particularly as priority areas the Delors II package (i.e. Community financing) reform of the CAP, Enlargement etc. But there will be other issues. We are to have another Intergovernmental Conference in 1996. We need to ask ourselves now where we want to be by then.

You and we probably agree about enlargement; about the need to get the mechanism of the Common Foreign and Security Policy pillar working properly; and similarly the need to get the mechanism of the interior/justice provisions working properly. We may not be as enthusiastic as you about the Delors II package. But even where we disagree we can talk about it. Between us we share a parliamentary tradition to a much greater extent than our other partners. We need to encourage our European partners to develop the same sense of accountability to their constituents as we have to ours. Our colleagues sometimes seem to be almost unencumbered by constituency responsibilities - as appeared in relation to social policy issues at Maastricht.

Minister for F.A. The Taoiseach has appointed a Minister for European Affairs.

Major (To Garel-Jones) You should meet him.

Garel-Jones Yes I will be doing so on Monday.

Taoiseach We would have different views on the need for increased resources for the Community.

Major Yes we feel that the Commission has its hands in our pockets more than we do ourselves. There is still 3bn ECU unused in the existing own resources arrangements. We see the Commission proposal (for an increase in own resources from 1.2% to 1.37% of GNP) as an opening bid only. We could not contemplate anything like it. Neither indeed could the Germans who have to take account of the views of the Lander (States in Germany). This will be the subject of fierce negotiation. It will have to be reduced.

Garel-Jones The present figure of 1.2% of GNP is an upper limit below which we are operating (i.e. there is still 3bn ECU to be drawn on under that provision). This 1.2% of course is itself dynamic. It will grow over time since GNP is estimated to grow by 2%.

Taoiseach I can understand that Delors in making his proposal engaged in the classic negotiation technique.

In Northern Ireland you are excluded from the Cohesion Fund which applies only to States.

Brooke (facetiously) So are Corsica, the German Lander etc.

Taoiseach I will push the case for you if the issue arises.

Brooke I will remember that when we discuss North/South Cooperation!

Major The Northern Ireland MPs came to see me about it. But the Cohesion Fund was expressly designed for member States.

Are there any other matters? Where we agree it is an advantage to parade publicly to North and South that we are in agreement and that we are fighting on the same side. We ought to do that as a matter of course.

Taoiseach I agree.

Major Do you realise that it is only six hours before the cricket match (Britain against the West Indies in Australia)!

Brooke We are very strongly in favour of all those aspects of policy which are capable of extending the scale of economic integration of the island. Where it is economically better to do it together we should do so rather than doing it separately.

Taoiseach One of these has to be tourism.

Minister for Justice Yes tourism is very important to us. It is worth flbn annually. (There was an additional reference to its role in the Irish economy and to the Irish/UK trade balance.)

Taoiseach We get one million tourists from here.

Mawhinney That is very important. Bord Fáilte is cooperating with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board.

Minister for Justice I have to say honestly that it doesn't work very well. We do not have a lot of cross-border tourism. There was a lot in the late 1950s. You could see a lot of Northern Ireland cars on the roads in the West of Ireland where I come from. But there were a lot of hotels there that had to close down when it dried up and they are only getting restarted again now.

Brooke (facetiously) Richard Needham (Junior Minister at NIO) and I agree that the only benefit which will result from the unlikely event of our being defeated at the polls would be the opportunity which would be available for ex-Ministers in business in the island of Ireland!

Mawhinney My great Grandfather came from Rossapenna in Donegal and I spent holidays there as a child.

Minister for Justice Yes Donegal benefits from the cross-border tourism.

Major (to the Taoiseach) Are you going back tonight?

Taoiseach No - I will be meeting Neil Kinnock at breakfast in the morning.

Major Oh - you are meeting Neil?

I look forward to seeing you soon - in Europe, in Dublin or here. We have a good relationship. We must keep it in shape and keep in touch.

N. Dorr  
Secretary, DFA  
27 February, 1992