



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/94/28

Creator(s): Department of the Taoiseach

Accession Conditions: Open

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

POLITICAL TALKS

Speaking Notes

[To be reviewed in the light of the final outcome of Mr. Brooke's meeting with the Party leaders on Monday 27th]

- I am very grateful to you for this update on your contacts with the political parties and on yesterday's meeting.
- I too am of the view that it would not be wise to force the pace in the present rather highly charged political atmosphere. Even if no date has been fixed, the British election campaign has clearly already begun, with all that implies.
- At the same time, we must be careful not to lose the very considerable gains which have been made: We have after all a basis of talks agreed in broad outline by all the parties. The main obstacle remaining to be overcome relates to the election, and this will, by definition, resolve itself in the fairly near future.
- I feel that with fresh mandates after the election things will be easier for all the parties. I believe it will be of tremendous benefit at that stage that so many of the preliminary hurdles will already have been dealt with.
- It is important now to avoid recrimination and blame which could only embitter relations between the parties and make things more difficult in the future. We need to keep the parties focussed in a positive way on the likely prospect of getting down seriously to talks in a few months time.
- Any talk of failure of the joint effort we have been engaged in can only give comfort to those elements hostile to the political process. Neither Government can have any interest in that.

- The position taken by the party leaders after yesterday's meeting was generally positive and constructive.

- The on-going contacts you have organised with the parties in the period up to the election will also be helpful, both as an additional preparation for talks and as a way of keeping the parties committed to the process of dialogue.

Political Developments

Background Note

(as of Monday 27 January P. M.)

1. At the Conference meeting on 18 December the Secretary of State proposed a formula to facilitate a resumption of talks which might be put to the parties. This formula involved commencing a gap after the January Conference. The gap would run until after the election had been called, when a Conference meeting would be held. There would be a post-election Conference which would confirm that there would be no further Conference for two months or until the end of June, whichever was the later date. Conditional on no agreement having been reached in the talks before the election, and on there being no change in administration, the talks would resume within two weeks of polling day on the same basis as before.

2. Since the beginning of the year the Secretary of State has had two meetings with the SDLP (10 and 16 January) and two with the Unionist parties (7 and 13 January). He is to have a joint meeting with the leaders of all four parties at Westminster on Monday 27 January.

3. The main surviving obstacle in the way of a resumption of talks is the Unionist stipulation, reflected in the above formula, that talks would continue after the British general election only if there were no change of Government and to reserve their position in the event of a Labour Government. (The formula of 18 December, it emerged subsequently, was based on a formula which the Secretary of State had discussed with the Unionists on 12 December - something to which the British side made no reference at the 18 December meeting). At a meeting which the Secretary of State had with the SDLP on 19 December, the latter indicated that it found this aspect of the formula unacceptable. The SDLP is of the view that the

continuation of talks after the election should not be made conditional on any particular outcome. They have suggested a pre-election agreement between the Conservative and Labour parties that talks, if in progress, could resume after the election on the same basis.

4. At a meeting with the Government on 9 January, the SDLP explained their problems in this regard pointing out that they would be placed in an impossible situation if they appeared to be taking sides in a British electoral situation. They were also anxious that there should be a clear understanding on when Strand Two would begin. The Government supported their position.

5. In a video link-up discussion with the Secretary of State on the following day, the SDLP reiterated the points made to the Government the previous day, emphasising their refusal to accept anything which would leave a question mark over the talks continuing in the event of a change of administration following the British general election.

6. At their meeting with the Secretary of State on 7 January, the Unionists reiterated their views on several matters, including their difficulty with the holding of a second Conference after the election and their condition regarding a change in Government at Westminster. Ian Paisley also raised the question of Sir Ninian Stephen as Chairman of Strand Two. The Secretary of State reportedly told them that any attempt to re-open the chairmanship issue would kill off any possibility of the talks beginning before the election. Nevertheless, Paisley indicated that he would like to know the names of the other candidates proposed by either side and how Sir Ninian had been chosen.

7. At a second meeting with the Secretary of State on 13 January, the Unionists apparently dropped their objections to

a second Conference after the general election and offered new language on the issue of a change in Government after the election. In separate discussions with the Secretary of State, Ian Paisley seemed to withdraw his objections to Sir Ninian Stephen as Chairman of Strand Two.

8. Following that meeting, the British Government on 15 January proposed a new formula to meet the Unionist precondition:

"all the Northern Ireland parties have agreed that following the election they would resume the talks after consultation with the new Government to clarify its constitutional policy, aims and objectives and to confirm that the resumed talks were to be held on the same basis".

9. Meeting the Secretary of State on the following day (16 January), the SDLP rejected this formula, saying that they could only accept an unconditional formula, such as:

"the talks will continue after the election on the same basis"

10. The Minister had a meeting for over an hour with the Secretary of State in Dublin on Friday 17 January during which Mr. Brooke indicated that he would make one last contact with the parties to establish whether this obstacle could be overcome and so enable talks to resume before the election.

11. After the meeting the Minister said in an RTE interview that:

"there is quite a considerable difficulty now in the way of getting the talks process on stream.....we are both determined to try and make a worthwhile effort in dealing with that particular problem.."

Referring to the complications caused by the approaching general election in Britain, he said that : "..we must

recognise that the existence or the imminence of a General Election in Britain does have quite a strong influence on the situation as it is right now".

12. In an address to the Dublin Chamber of Commerce after his meeting with the Minister, the Secretary of State said:

"After discussions this morning with Mr. Collins, I shall continue to explore the possibility with the other potential participants. However, the prospects of advance recede. The uncertainties of the outcome of the election, on the one hand, and the need, on the other, for a process of this kind to have a reasonable chance of continuing to a conclusion, provide understandable obstacles to progress. That is, in my view, regrettable, given public support for the process. There is, however, such general agreement on the basis for, and value of, such talks that we may find a way through. If not, then I hope and believe such talks should remain high on the agenda for everyone - whatever the colour of the British Government after our election."

13. The IRA bombing of a bus of Protestant workmen at Teebane on Friday, killing eight on board, resulted in predictable Unionist calls for internment and new security measures. However, Unionist anger at the Secretary of State was greatly increased when they became aware that Mr. Brooke had appeared and sung a song on the Late Late Show on Friday evening only hours after the bombing. (Mr. Brooke stayed on in Dublin for the weekend to attend the Ireland/England rugby match). The outcry, including calls by Unionist leaders for Mr. Brooke's resignation, led to Mr. Brooke's offer of his resignation on Monday 20 January. The offer was subsequently rejected by PM Major, after he had visited the North and Mr Brooke had received wide cross-party support (excluding the Unionists) in the House of Commons. The Unionists later on Monday had a two-hour meeting with the PM to discuss the security situation and

put proposals to him in the light of the Teebane bombing.

14. Confirmed in his position, Mr. Brooke issued an invitation on 21 January to all parties to meet together with him for discussions "on the basis on which we might have fresh political talks" or if not "the implications for the political process" (copy below). He suggested a meeting on Thursday 23 January. Diary difficulties resulted in the proposed meeting being put back until Monday 27 January.

15. The meeting with the party leaders this afternoon established that there was an impasse for the time being. Discussions pointed to an implicit acceptance by all the leaders of a "soft landing" approach. It was agreed that, in the interval before the election, briefings would be offered to the parties on matters likely to arise in talks (i.e. administrative arrangements etc.) and that party leaders would have regular meetings with the Secretary of State on matters of mutual interest, such as economic issues. A joint press statement by the party leaders is expected to issue later this afternoon. This is expected to reflect general support for the March 26 statement as the basis for future talks, give a positive assessment of contacts in recent weeks and refer to briefings and meetings with the Secretary of State in the interval.

Anglo-Irish Division

27 January 1992

The Secretary of State, the Rt Hon Peter Brooke MP,
 accompanied by the Minister of State, Dr Brian Mahoney MP, today met the leaders of the four main constitutional political parties in Northern Ireland, the Rt Hon James Molyneux MP, Mr John Hume MP MEP, Dr Ian Paisley MP MEP, and Dr John Alderdice.

2. Together they reviewed the outcome of the round of discussions which have taken place since last September in the search for agreement on a basis for fresh political talks. They reasserted their support for a process of talks based on the statement of 26 March. However, they concluded with regret that it was not possible in present circumstances to proceed to launch fresh substantive talks on the lines envisaged.

3. They agreed that the various exchanges which had taken place over the past two years had been valuable in producing a basis for political dialogue which retained great potential and had yet to be fully exploited. They recalled the talks which took place between the parties in June and July last year and reaffirmed the view that these had produced genuine dialogue and provided a firm foundation for further substantive exchanges in due course. They expressed the hope that this would be taken further at the appropriate time.

4. The party leaders agreed that, in the meantime, at the invitation of the Secretary of State, they would meet to consider matters of common concern, including in the economic field, in the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland. They also agreed to respond to an invitation to their party leaders to take part, for information, in intensive factual briefings, under the chairmanship of the Minister of State, on present financial and other administrative arrangements affecting the people of Northern Ireland.

5. The party leaders expressed the hope that by continuing to work together and by making representations together on matters of common concern they would contribute to the growth of mutual trust and confidence within the community in Northern Ireland, which would eventually aid the talks process.

CONFIDENTIAL

18 DECEMBER FORMULA ON GAP FOR TALKS

To allow an opportunity for talks to take place [on the basis announced on 26 March] the two Governments have agreed that after the next meeting of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Conference there will be no further meeting of the Conference until after the UK General Election has been called, when the talks would cease and a meeting of the Conference would be held. The two Governments envisage that another Conference would be held immediately after the election. The post-election Conference would confirm that the next meeting would not be held for another two months or until the end of June, whichever is the later, given that all the Northern Ireland participating parties have agreed that if the talks have not been concluded before the election is called and if there is no change of Administration the talks will be resumed within two weeks after polling day on the same basis. It would be open to that Conference to extend this period if that seemed appropriate.

18 December 1991

W8154

I M M E D I A T E

SECURE FAX 080

21 January 1992

TO: HQ FROM: Belfast

PAGES: 2

FOR: A/Sec O hUiginn FROM: Joint Secretary

Mr Brooke's Letter to the Party Leaders

Robert Alston called at 6.30 and left the attached text of a letter which Mr Brooke is now sending to the four party leaders. The fact of the letter will be made public about 8 p.m. in time for the 9 p.m. news.

The letter results from a strategy meeting between Mr Brooke and his officials at Hillsborough this afternoon and it is based on three calculations:

- (1) that any sense of drift or indecision would be fatal to the prospects of achieving anything in the near future and that accordingly it is necessary to reassert the role of the Secretary of State
- (2) that granted the deadline of the Conference next Tuesday (and the underlying understanding that if any gap is to be arranged it must start very shortly) some risk has to be taken to bring matters to a head; if it does not succeed, it would be desirable to try and write a tidy end to the chapter on the lines of last July in order to give the best chance of restarting at a later date, and
- (3) that the only way to proceed is to convene a meeting of the party leaders because, at this stage, a text is "unbrokerable", that is to say, it would not be realistic for Mr Brooke to seek a compromise text by separate discussions with the parties in view of their contrary positions and in view of the difficulty he has with the Unionists (although Molyneaux, clearly sensing that the Unionist attacks on Brooke have gone too far, has moved to shore him up in an ITV interview this evening).

Mr Brooke is anxious that the text of the letter should be got to the Minister as soon as possible so that he would not be surprised by its announcement. He told his officials that he believed this initiative was consistent with the options he discussed with the Minister last Friday.

Text of Mr Brooke's Letter to the Party Leaders, 21 January 1992

We have had extended discussions on the basis on which we might hold fresh political talks. I believe we have now reached the point where we should all consider, together, whether we can resolve the outstanding obstacles to agreement.

Accordingly, I am inviting you and the other party leaders to a meeting in Westminster on Thursday afternoon.

If we are unable to reach agreement on a basis for fresh talks I trust we shall be able to consider together, in the spirit which prevailed on 2 and 3 July, the implications for the political process and for Northern Ireland more generally in the period before the election.

Given the considerable current public interest in and speculation about these matters I have decided to make the fact of this invitation - though not the terms of this letter - known later today. My office will be in touch to make the necessary arrangements. I am writing in similar terms to the other party leaders.