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22 January 1992

CONFIDENTIAL

Mr Sean O hUiginn
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Assistant Secretary

Call by the Cabinet Office and Foreign Office

Ms Pauline Neville-Jones, Deputy Secretary at the Cabinet Office, and Mr Jeremy Greenstock, Under Secretary at the Foreign Office, called to the Secretariat last Monday evening for a conversation with ourselves and our British colleagues. They were on a briefing visit to Northern Ireland (independent of and coincidental with the Prime Minister's).

Ms Neville-Jones is the senior officer dealing with Irish affairs in the Cabinet Office. Mr Greenstock's appointment is a recent one at the Foreign Office; he is placed between the Counsellor in charge of the Republic of Ireland Department, Mr Graham Archer, and the Deputy Secretary, Mr Nigel Broomfield. You may recall that the former British Ambassador in Dublin, Sir Nicholas Fenn, told us he had encouraged this appointment in order to ensure high level interest in Irish affairs at the Foreign Office. Mr Broomfield was thought to need assistance because of his other European and security responsibilities. So far, Mr Greenstock seems to have followed Mr Broomfield in leaving Irish matters in the hands of Mr Archer.

As might be expected, the discussion focused on the controversy surrounding Mr Brooke since his appearance on the Late Late Show last Friday. In light of the Carrickmore bombing, might there yet be a public demand for political talks to start before the election? Even if there were such a demand, were the political parties now too far apart on the "change of government" issue? Could talks keep going in the pre-election atmosphere? Had the parties been playing games all along or had there ever been a real interest on their part? Was Mr Brooke now politically "crippled", as Ms Neville-Jones put it, or could he yet oversee further developments?

Ms Neville-Jones also raised some long term questions about the relationship between Dublin and the SDLP, the possibility of making progress with the current party leaders in the North, the timescale of a future settlement, whether we might be prepared to act with the British Government without reference to the SDLP or

whether we would always feel the need to accommodate their views, whether our strategy was gradualist and longterm or whether we might be prepared to act decisively in the face of rapidly-unfolding events on the model of Eastern Europe.

The trend of her questioning was that in view of the different positions taken by the SDLP and the Unionists, the backing given by Dublin to the SDLP position and the political disaster that had befallen Mr Brooke, there was now little or no prospect of talks before the election. This is a view current in the NIO since last Friday and it is probably held by Mr Brooke himself. Another visitor yesterday, Mr Peter Ball, the Undersecretary on the political side, described his mood as relaxed (in the sense of a burden having been lifted from a man who sees the game is up).

I said things certainly looked at an end but there had been many twists in the tale over the past two years. There could be public pressure for talks to start again although as Mr Greenstock noted there had been no great clamour so far, the SDLP had been suggesting their readiness to begin immediately (on the basis of the 26 March statement) and the UUP were taking a more restrained approach than the DUP to Mr Brooke. I noted that Molyneaux had not yet spoken about Brooke's position but had suggested talks between himself and Hume (in fact, he moved to shore up Brooke in an ITV interview yesterday).

As the Minister for Foreign Affairs had made clear to Mr Brooke on Friday, the Irish Government were still anxious to help although we saw that in a fraught pre-election atmosphere, other difficulties could arise to replace the present ones even if they were got over. For the moment, we had to see if the Unionists would deal with Mr Brooke, if he could arrange further discussion with them on their requirement that they should have the right to opt out after the election and, depending on their answer, whether there could yet be agreement with the SDLP.

Both our guests referred to the notion that for the first time "light had opened up between Dublin and the SDLP" and they were interested to know whether we thought this had implications for the future. (Comment: It seems someone in the British system is suggesting that the Conference of 18 December opened a difference between Dublin and the SDLP of historic importance.) I said that the British Government had been too insistent on the Unionists' behalf and as a result the text agreed at the Conference of 18 December had been over-ambitious. The SDLP were plainly worried that the Unionists were preparing a position which would allow them to avoid getting to Strand Two before the election and to opt out after it. They also saw that the Unionists were using the idea of a gap beyond the election to put pressure on the British Labour Party not only to agree to continue the talks on the same basis, but to change its policy of unity by consent which was a different matter. Perhaps there would have been a better chance of an accommodation if the Unionist demands brought by the British Government to the Conference had been moderated.

Be that as it may, we had had to deal with the situation we found ourselves in. We had tried to be helpful but the SDLP's concerns about Unionist intentions were emphatic and it was perfectly clear that they would not entertain their demands. As things stood, we agreed with the SDLP view.

Ms Neville-Jones suggested that we were now understanding of the SDLP position but not of the Unionist position. I said that consistent with our attitude throughout this process, our Ministers had given Messrs Brooke and Mawhinney the leeway they believed they needed so that the talks might be restarted; that had involved not too little but too much understanding of the Unionists and on a basis that, as we now knew, had been previously agreed with them by the British Government although concealed from ourselves. Since the Conference, public exchanges between the parties had changed the political situation and we had to deal with it as we found it. I pointed out that Mr Brooke himself had expressed full understanding of the SDLP's concern as well as of the Unionist difficulty with a possible British Labour Government; in particular, he had told the Unionists of Hume's real concern that without certainty about the arrangements for the gap, the parties would not put their cards on the table.

Ms Neville-Jones asked how things might develop in the future. I said that major progress had been made in the last two years, singling out the Unionist agreement to talk to Dublin and the consensus that nothing would be agreed until everything was agreed which defined the interlinking nature of the three strands of talks. It would be important to preserve this progress so that it could be used as a foundation for the future. It would also be important to limit the finger-pointing already going on and to encourage a positive view of the process to date. For example, how the Unionist parties dealt with the matter in their election manifestos could be significant; they might influence Unionist politicians' thinking and and their room for manoeuvre for some time ahead. I recalled how long it had taken the Unionists to escape from their 1987 manifestos.

We had a very general discussion about the timescale in which a settlement might be made, whether it would be once and for all or gradual, whether further progress would have to await a new generation of political leaders in the North and so on. Ms Neville-Jones took a suggestion I made that the change in political positions had been so substantial that, assuming it was preserved and built upon, developments might occur much more rapidly than most commentators expected. Reflecting on the pace of change in Eastern Europe, she wondered if we would be ready if the political picture altered dramatically here. Could we envisage acting with the British Government without reference to the SDLP? Her question was framed in a way that suggested we had a longterm do-little policy that envisaged the apple of Northern Ireland dropping by gravity into our hand.

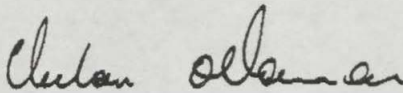
I responded first that throughout the past two years the British Government had overestimated our relationship with the SDLP

whereas they had sometimes been less than candid with us about their own dealings with the Unionists. Second, it was an essential feature of the Agreement and the process leading to it that we had a right and a duty to represent the concerns of Northern Nationalists. We would not turn away from this obligation but that did not mean that our hands were shackled behind our back.

Comment

Ms Neville-Jones rather than Mr Greenstock did most of the talking. She seemed stimulated by the briefings she had already received and it was, I think, useful that she had the opportunity to hear alternative views. I have met her previously (at the Nally/Butler diner) and she reinforced my initial impression of an energetic, intelligent and politically focussed person who could exert considerable influence on the British side from her position in the Cabinet Office. I would not read too much into her line of questioning which is not unusual for this kind of briefing session. But it may be that at this point, some on the British side are wondering if the Brooke approach of trying to get a voluntary accomodation between the parties is as crippled as his own stewardship appears to be in Northern Ireland; and if it is, whether a joint plan laid out by the two Governments might replace it. The occasion last evening did not offer the opportunity to probe this underlying idea very far but Ms Neville-Jones did respond positively to my suggestion that if the talks could not be brought any further for the present, the two Governments might take the opportunity to take stock of the last two years, where we stand now and what might be done in the future (I had in mind using the Nally/Butler group with perhaps a sub-group of senior officials, including Ms Neville-Jones, reporting to it but I did not mention this.)

Yours sincerely



Declan O'Donovan
Joint Secretary