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25/6

Meeting with British officials

24/6

29.6.92

London, 19 June 1992

1. Following the meeting on 19 June to discuss a possible Strand Two agenda, a bilateral meeting took place between the Irish Government and British Government delegations. (The British team also included Messrs Alston and Cooke). The main topic discussed was the proposed meeting in Strand Three formation.

2. Chilcot understood that the Irish side had both policy and logistical difficulties with the proposal for an early meeting in this formation. O hUiginn confirmed that this was so - "when" and "how" the meeting should take place were problematic. Asked whether the Irish Government's thinking would be affected by the positive atmosphere in evidence at the pre-Strand Two meeting, Dorr replied that any positive evaluation of Friday's meeting was subject to the overall reserve placed by the DUP on its outcome. Chilcot observed that the DUP delegation had balanced a moderate (Dodds) with a hard-liner (Gibson), with "Rhonda there for Dad".

3. Dorr asked whether what the British side envisaged was a "pre-Strand Three" meeting analogous to the "pre-Strand Two" meeting which had just ended?. The British side felt that, as with the latter, it should be possible to have a meeting directed at the preparation of a draft agenda at which the various parties would have an opportunity to explore each other's positions.

4. Thomas reiterated the British side's approach to the pre-

Strand Three meeting (as previously indicated at the Liaison Group meeting on 15 June). They envisaged an agenda which would offer a set of mutual reassurances. They felt that this aspect would be all the more important as, notwithstanding the positive atmosphere, the reassurance value of the pre-Strand Two meeting had been limited (because of its procedural rather than substantive emphasis).

5. Chilcot commented that the object of the pre-Strand Three meeting was to help the DUP into Strand Two. He saw no likelihood of the DUP going to Strand Two on the basis of Friday's meeting alone. They would wish to reassure themselves, via the pre-Strand Three meeting, that the British Government had a view on Articles Two and Three and that a referendum on this subject could conceivably form part of an overall deal. From Paisley's point of view, to enter Strand Two and emerge from it without some form of acceptable deal would be tantamount to political suicide.

6. O hUiginn asked why, if the DUP wished to have reassurance that support in relation to Articles Two and Three would be forthcoming from the British Government, they could not seek such reassurance bilaterally from the British Government. Dorr pointed out that to depart from the 26 March terms by allowing "window-shopping" in relation to Strands Two and Three involved playing to the most extreme of Unionist positions. It also reinforced the concept that a firm agreement was required in Strand One before there could be onward progress to the other strands. Echoing the concern about the departure from the agreed timetable, O hUiginn asked the British side what arguments could be put to Irish Ministers in order to persuade them of the value of a pre-Strand Three meeting (which was now being presented as a condition for

the move to Strand Two).

7. Mildly disputing the term "window-shopping", Chilcot emphasized Hume's role as "progenitor" of the proposal for pre-Strand Two and pre-Strand Three meetings and suggested (several times) that any queries about it should be addressed to the SDLP leader. The British side felt that a positive response was called for to a proposal put together by the four leaders for the purpose of moving the process to the next stage. Responding to the point about possible bilateral contact between the DUP and the British Government, he said that the Secretary of State was not prepared to enter into bilateral deals in relation to this process.

8. O hUiginn said that the Irish Government had reluctantly accepted the principle of a pre-Strand Three meeting. For its reservations to be removed, the Government would need to be satisfied that the meeting would do no damage to the process and that the British Government would not be endorsing a strong DUP position in relation to Articles Two and Three which would call for a corresponding strong assertion of the nationalist position from the Irish Government. The danger was that the DUP would camouflage their refusal to accept the 26 March statement by a "grandstanding" on Articles Two and Three and shifting the blame for breakdown to the Irish and British Governments.

9. Asked to indicate what the Secretary of State might say at the meeting, Chilcot thought that an opening point would be the need for clarity on Northern Ireland's position within the UK if agreement were to be reached within the talks as a whole. He suggested that there might be "a question for yourselves there". O hUiginn noted that there were aspects fundamental to the

constitution of Northern Ireland which nationalists found offensive and he wondered whether an equivalence between the two options would be preserved. Chilcot replied evasively. Thomas suggested that, if it was a question of reiterating the language of Art. 1 of the Agreement, there would be no difficulty; if, however, it was a question of "vaguely threatening noises" about the Government of Ireland Act, the British side would have difficulties.

10. Dorr pointed to the risks inherent in the British Government coming down from its perch of relative neutrality in relation to the process so far in Strand One. A scenario whereby the DUP would not enter Strand Two without a clearer endorsement by the British Government of their position on Articles Two and Three amounted to the explicit recruitment of the British Government to the DUP's agenda. The British Government would be forced to adopt a position which adequately met the concerns of Paisley (who would be present at the pre-Strand Three meeting to satisfy himself that it did). How could it hope, at the same time, to maintain a position of relative neutrality in Strand One where its objective was to achieve agreement between the parties there?
11. O hUiginn and Dorr recalled the careful balance achieved, after lengthy negotiation, in Art. 1 of the Agreement. Dorr observed that the 1985 negotiations had considered this whole area exhaustively and had dealt with it in a balanced preambular paragraph which led into the carefully balanced Art. 1 of the Agreement. It would not be helpful to the present process if Articles Two and Three were at this stage simply to be intruded on top of Art. 1 of the existing Agreement.

12. In response, Chilcot said that, in the statement of 26 March 1991, the British Government had already set out clearly its position on Articles Two and Three. The effect of the SDLP's proposals in Strand One had been to blur the distinction between Strands One and Two and to cause the DUP (which had otherwise contemplated raising Articles Two and Three in Strand Two) to think instead of raising them in Strand Three. The DUP required some cover in order to get to Strand Two. Hume had clearly reached a judgment that, without these two preliminary meetings, the DUP would not go to Strand Two. Cooke also observed that Strand Three would bring up a number of issues which the DUP would find unpalatable (such as the success of the Anglo-Irish Conference, the need for a Secretariat, etc).

13. O hUiginn again underlined the risk of a "grandstanding" performance by Paisley at the pre-Strand Three meeting and asked what the Strand Three agenda could contain other than "the outcome of Strands One and Two, writ large". He suggested that detailed consideration be given to the script for the Secretary of State at the pre-Strand Three meeting. It was agreed that officials would meet to prepare in detail the exchanges which would take place between the Governments during the section of the meeting when observers would be present.

14. On the practicalities for the meeting, O hUiginn flagged Irish Government reservations about a renewed London venue. While it was not excluded that the Government might ultimately agree to a London meeting, we would, if it came to this, favour premises not ordinarily used by the NIO. The invitation to observers, furthermore, would have to be a joint one and issued on equal terms. These points were accepted. As to the timing of the venue, O hUiginn pointed out that, in the light of points made

through the Secretariat on the previous afternoon, there was no basis for the Secretary of State's indication in the House of Commons that a pre-Strand Three meeting would take place "next week". (The British response was that our representations had not reached the Secretary of State before he spoke). In relation to timing, the Irish side indicated the Minister for Foreign Affairs' forthcoming commitments; the British side mentioned that Thursday was out for the Secretary of State because of NI Questions.

15. It was agreed that there would be a meeting of the Liaison Group in Dublin on 22 June, at which the British side would furnish more specific ideas in relation to the agenda for Strand Three and work would also be commenced on coordinated "scripting" for the occasion. The British side also hoped that agreement might be reached on the terms of a joint invitation to the observers.

David Donoghue
David Donoghue

22 June 1992

cc PSM, PSS, Mr. Nally, Mr. Bresnan, Joint Secretary, Ambassador London,
Ambassador Washington, Ambassador Canberra.