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BÉALFEIRSTE

BELFAST

11 December 1992

CONFIDENTIAL

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

McTearlan
by O'Sullivan
(A mod. important report)
huh
11-12-92

19/12

PSS
Mr Nally
and
Councillor A)
Prox

Dear Assistant Secretary

Conversation with Dr. John Dunlop

You will recall that at a farewell reception for the British Joint Secretary, Robert Alston, at Stormont last week, the present Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, Dr. John Dunlop, approached myself and Mr. Farrell and said he would like to have a discussion with us and bring along some others. It was not clear what he had in mind, so I arranged to meet him at his house in North Belfast on Tuesday for a preliminary conversation. When I arrived, I found the University lecturer and Methodist preacher, Desmond Rea, also present.

80h
1571

Jigsaw Group

Both men are members of a small group called "jigsaw" which includes such people as Dan Harvey, Northern General Manager of AIB (who was one of our guests at the Christmas reception this week). It was arranged that the group would come into the Secretariat for dinner with ourselves and the British side early in the new year.

Dr. Dunlop mentioned that the Taoiseach had agreed to have dinner with the group but, following the calling of the election, they had moved themselves to cancel it in the belief that the Taoiseach's time would be taken up with immediate Government and election business. Dr. Dunlop said they would be making a further approach when a new Taoiseach was elected. I said I was sure the newly-elected Taoiseach would be happy to respond, as would the Minister for Foreign Affairs and yourself and other officials in the Department.

How close to agreement?

It was apparent that Dr. Dunlop had studied the papers leaked from the Political Talks and had had discussions of one form or other with the other participants. He had one query and one main theme to put to me. I expect he will wish to follow

up on these in contacts with Dublin, so it may be useful to report the conversation fairly fully.

He said he had got conflicting signals about the recent round of Talks: some suggested to him that the Talks had very nearly ended in agreement, others said the participants were very far apart. What was our view? I thought our Ministers would think it an exaggeration to say we had come very close to agreement. Ice had been broken, the Irish Government had sat down for intensive daily exchanges with the Unionist parties, the UUP had come to Dublin and, on the substance, a significant amount of preparatory work had been done in the various papers circulated by the participants. Perhaps, most importantly, there had been valuable discussion in bilateral meetings in the closing stages, notably those between the UUP and the Irish Government and between the UUP and the SDLP. In relation to the DUP, it had been important that they had joined the process, but they had been very difficult to deal with. They had failed to keep their agreement to come to Dublin, they had sometimes seemed in the Talks, sometimes out of the Talks, sometimes negotiating while simultaneously reserving their position, and quite often engaging in offensive diatribes.

In response to a specific question about the last paper tabled by the UUP, I said it would be evident from the document itself that the paper was in the nature of a political statement setting out the UUP position rather than, as had been suggested to Dr. Dunlop, a blueprint for agreement by all the participants. Our Ministers had found some of the discussion with the UUP on North/South structures very encouraging, although at other times much less so. They were keen to resume the Talks and the parties recently returned to the Dail had made it clear that whatever the composition of the new Government, there would be a determination to maintain progress.

Unionist decline: More positive approach needed from Irish side?

Dr. Dunlop and Mr. Rea then came home to their main theme which was that the Irish side needed to respond more constructively to the UUP. Molyneaux had chosen negotiators from the most moderate and conciliatory section of his party and there was a view that if we could not do a deal with them, we could do a deal with no one on the Unionist side. Dr. Dunlop spoke of a decline in Unionist confidence and a real sense of unease, even crisis, in his community. In his own Church, Presbyterians were migrating from west of the Bann and south of Banbridge and clustering in laagers around Belfast when they were not leaving Northern Ireland altogether. He mentioned that when he was in Newry twenty years ago, his congregation had consisted of about 250 families. The same congregation was now about half that. He had just encountered a young Presbyterian who had been

thinking of taking over a farm and refurbishing an old house in the Newry area, but had decided against it, telling Dr. Dunlop that "Newry is becoming just like Dundalk". In his own North Belfast middle-class housing estate near Belfast Castle, not a single Presbyterian had bought a house in recent years. The buyers had all been Catholic. He added that Presbyterianism was on the retreat everywhere in Ireland. I noted that a Presbyterian Church had in fact just opened in my home city of Kilkenny. Dr. Dunlop agreed that that was so and said another had opened in Lucan, but, these developments apart, the trend was downwards throughout the country. He put the trend down in large part to a sense of displacement among Presbyterians. He mentioned that at a recent Presbyterian gathering south of the Border, he had told the participants he would ask them one question and wanted them to think about their answer: were they Irish? I might be surprised to know that with one exception, they had answered "no" or "not really" in each case.

Dr. Dunlop made it clear that he deplored the inward looking bias in his own flock. He told them they should be prepared to live in mixed communities and would have to do so in the future. He thought, however, that the Catholic/Nationalist side needed to take the initiative*. There was a strengthening feeling in his community that developments in Northern Ireland were leading inexorably to a United Ireland and that each time there was discussion of the future, the Nationalist price was raised. That was how Unionists saw the last round of Talks. The SDLP, particularly, had "raised the price of the car" and there was a profound feeling that if Unionists made further concessions, the price would be raised again.

I asked Dr. Dunlop to reflect on a few points that many Nationalists would make: he himself had pointed out that people in his own flock did not want to live in mixed communities; if people were nervous of the future was it because they could not contemplate a genuine accommodation? In Northern Ireland, they had been left the possessors by the Government of Ireland Act 1920 and had exercised total dominance for decades until, in fact, quite recently. Even now, Unionists had disproportionate control of the reality and symbols of life in Northern Ireland, central and local government, the security forces, the courts, the professions and business. Dr. Dunlop and Mr. Rea readily acknowledged these points including the reluctance of Unionists to share power, but they seemed genuinely fearful that Unionists would pull back from a relatively advanced position in the Talks and that Nationalists would hold out for a United Ireland, and, in the meantime, raise the hurdle every time Unionists tried to jump it. That view of Nationalist thinking was gaining fast on the Unionist side and it was very possible it would produce a violent reaction. We should try to correct that view.

... /

Balanced package required to win a referendum

In response to the idea that the Nationalist side were raising their price, I asked Dr. Dunlop again to consider the Nationalist perspective. It was the Unionist side that had raised Articles 2 and 3 into a great issue over the last six or seven years. That Unionist campaign and constant highlighting of Article 2 and 3 in the Talks, sometimes to the exclusion of other matters altogether, had, not surprisingly, provoked anxiety on the Nationalist side. If it was a sine qua non for Unionists, as they had said, that Articles 2 and 3 must be changed, that meant a referendum in the South. No responsible Government could venture into a referendum on the basis that they might win or would probably win. They would have to have virtual certainty. A referendum loss would set the prospect of progress back by years and encourage the forces of violence. I pointed out that Sinn Fein had achieved only 1.6% of the vote in our recent election despite contesting 37 constituencies compared to 12 in 1989 when they had gained 1.2% of the vote. These were gains of the last ten years as were those of the SDLP against Sinn Fein in the North; it was in the wider interest not to put them at risk.

This was the first time that discussions for a settlement had been predicated on a referendum, indeed referenda North and South. In the past, at Sunningdale and again in the negotiations for the Anglo-Irish Agreement, referenda to ratify the outcome had been considered by all concerned to be too hazardous a course of action. If the Nationalists were to be convinced that a change should be made in regard to Articles 2 and 3, they would have to be presented with a balanced package catering for the identity of Northern Nationalists which, it was recognised, had an external dimension.

North/South institution

Dr. Dunlop did not quarrel with this view but he did bring up the nature of any North/South institution, referring to the published documents of the Talks and, in particular, to the last UUP paper. How wide would the exercise of joint authority (as he called it) have to go. Would we limit it to a certain number of agreed subjects? I said our Ministers did not think it could be limited to a number of Foyle Fishery-type commissions established by the Irish Government and the Northern Administration; it would have to be a distinct structure with substantial responsibilities and a capacity and dynamic to develop, although the pace and direction of development would be for discussion. Messrs. Dunlop and Rea said this was the crux. They did not believe that any body that could be interpreted as an All-Ireland institution, or the start of one, exercising joint authority, would be acceptable to Unionists. They gave the impression that this had been the main subject of debate in the Unionist/Alliance

post mortem on the last round, and that the position of these parties had hardened on the matter.

Messrs. Dunlop and Rea thanked me for the conversation and looked forward to dinner at the Secretariat in the new year. I mentioned that if they wished to pursue ideas on the Political Talks in a formal or specific way, it would be desirable to put their views directly in Dublin and I repeated that I was sure the newly-elected Taoiseach would be glad to see them.

Comment

Dr. Dunlop mentioned that he has been talking to the British Government as well as to the political parties and it is clear he has been influenced by the British/Unionist/Alliance view of events. He expressed concern especially about the SDLP's Strand One proposals and our views on North/South structures.

His thoughts about the decline in Presbyterian numbers and their unwillingness to integrate has been commented on by others here and is borne out by the recent census figures on which Mr. Farrell has reported. He has prepared the the comparison below between the 1961 and 1991 surveys of the three main denominations which speaks for itself.

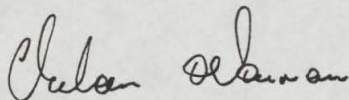
	<u>1991</u>	<u>1961</u> *
Roman Catholic	605,639	497,547
Presbyterian	336,891	413,113
Church of Ireland	279,280	344,800

* The census of 1961 is regarded as more reliable than those of 1971 or 1981, hence this particular comparison. The 1991 figures do not reveal the full extent of the shift because in this census it was possible not to reply to the religious question or to say "none". Eleven percent chose one or other of these options. How that figure should be broken down is open to debate: it seems likely that the population of Catholic background is now 42% or more, although the Northern authorities seem to be adopting a slightly smaller figure for policy planning purposes (this is a matter that could be discussed at the next Conference). The proportion of Catholics in the young population is agreed to be much higher; recent Department of Education statistics show the percentage of the school population at Catholic schools at 50.2% overall which excludes a growing number of Catholics at non-Catholic schools.

Just as important as the overall decline in Presbyterian numbers is the Presbyterian move away from Catholic areas: Mr Farrell has shown that in the eleven district areas of Northern Ireland where Catholics are in the majority, the highest percentage of Presbyterians anywhere is in Limavady, where they comprise only 19% of the population (the lowest is in Fermanagh at 3%).

There is considerable argument among demographers about how soon, or if, Catholics will exceed Protestants in numbers even assuming the present birthrates and patterns of emigration which may not be maintained. Whatever happens, however, there are developing objective grounds to support the policy of the New Ireland Forum and Anglo-Irish Agreement for equality of treatment of the two traditions in the North. Nationalists are coming more and more to recognise and assert that policy but it is threatening those on the Unionist side who can only envisage hegemony for one side or the other and see equality of treatment as code for dilution of British sovereignty in preparation for a United Ireland.

Yours sincerely



Declan O'Donovan
Joint Secretary

* Note for Meeting with Taoiseach

If Unionist politicians set in train a fundamental and strategic change in their largely sectarian approach to the operation of the District Councils, a roughly corresponding pressure would likely weigh upon Nationalist politicians to reciprocate that trust, particularly in 'higher-level' politics. Such a Unionist gesture would signal to the Nationalist community that the long-overdue necessary change in attitude was now beginning.

Jc ²¹/₁₂