



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Government/SDLP Meeting 9 January 1992

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W8152

Meeting between the Government and the SDLP

Thursday, 9 January, 1992

OVERVIEW NOTE

1. The discussions can be expected to centre on the proposal for resumed round-table talks. It may be useful to consider (a) the prospects and conditions for resumed talks and (b) tactical and organisational issues if the talks do resume.

(a) Prospects

2. All parties, except the Unionists, have consistently stated their willingness to return to the table on the previously agreed basis (set out in Mr. Brooke's statement of 26 March 1991). Initial Unionist resistance seems to have changed in December to near acquiescence, and it is now assumed the Unionists accept all the elements of the March 26 Statement with the following exceptions:

- The duration of the gap. It is agreed by all that a gap could run from the next Conference (end January) to the calling of a British general election, when a Conference would convene and the talks would end. The Unionists agree to return to the table after an election in the event of a new Conservative administration but reserve their position in the event of a Labour victory. A formula proposed by Mr. Brooke, reflecting a commitment by all parties to return to the table in the event of no change in administration, has been strongly criticised by Mr. Hume and by Mr. Kevin McNamara as linking the process to Tory election interests. Mr. McNamara has formally stated his party's readiness if in Government to continue the talks on the same basis. If the Unionists maintain

their position, the post-election situation may be left in abeyance. Alternatively the other parties may register their willingness to continue irrespective of the election outcome, leaving the Unionists to enter a reservation on their own account.

- Chairmanship of Strand Two. Paisley has not lifted his objection to Sir Ninian Stephen. Mr. Brooke expects him to do so, and has made clear that a continued objection would destroy any possibility of talks prior to an election. (It is also clear that the Unionists hope, and will probably try to ensure that the pre-election gap will deal only with Strand One. Mr. Brooke is however fully seized of the importance for the SDLP and the Government of honouring the commitment to proceed to Strand Two a month or so into the gap, assuming the election date permits).

- Venue for Strand One. The Unionists want Westminster (ostensibly to minimise media interference). The SDLP prefer Belfast (the previous location). Mr. Brooke is aiming for some mixture of the two.

- Numbers for Strand One. The Unionists wish the numbers reduced to three, the SDLP prefer to maintain the previous formula (delegation of ten, three at the table, four behind, three others in the building).

3. Mr. Brooke proposes a (video-link) contact with Mr. Hume on Friday and, possibly, contacts with all party leaders on Monday next. Assuming outstanding issues can be settled, and no others arise, Mr. Brooke would presumably draft an updated "March 26 statement" for approval by all participants and announcement prior to the next Conference, now proposed for January 28th.

(b) Tactics and Organisation

4. It may be useful to have an exchange of views on tactics in a new Strand One. The working assumption is that the talks, although formally new, would in practice take up where they last left off. This may leave less room for general debate, and the British may try to hurry discussion into practical (and, by definition, internal) issues. Should the SDLP get drawn into tabling proposals, etc., given that the election makes serious business less likely? Will they be criticised for failing to do so, or give the Unionists tactical grounds for resisting Strand Two?

5. The practical arrangements for liaison with the Government seemed to have worked well on the previous occasion. Are there any different arrangements the SDLP would wish to have?

Anglo-Irish Division
8 January, 1992

SDLP VIEWS

The following is a summary account of the SDLP position on the various issues which arise in relation to a possible resumption of talks.

The SDLP wish to see talks resumed at the point where they were interrupted last summer and on the basis of the Secretary of State's statement of 26 March 1991. It is their understanding, from their recent contacts with the Secretary of State, that the Unionists have accepted the key elements of that statement as the basis for fresh talks. This includes acceptance of the principle of talks on a three-stranded basis involving the two Governments and the four parties and occurring in a gap between meetings of the Conference. It also means renewed acceptance of the understandings reached last year in relation to the original Unionist preconditions (notably the role of the Secretariat during the gap) and of the timing and conditions, as indicated in the 26 March statement, for the transition from Strand One to Strand Two. It also involves acceptance of the principles that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed and that the outcome of the negotiations will be submitted for popular endorsement via referenda North and South.

The SDLP have accepted without much difficulty a number of the new ideas put forward by the Unionists. They do not object to an altered format for talks which would involve fewer (two days a week) and more informal meetings. They also accept that everything said in the talks which concluded on 3 July last would be regarded as already on the record for any new talks. They also have no major difficulty with the Unionists' concerns about publicity (though, as the Unionists were the worst offenders on the last occasion, the SDLP's reaction to these concerns has been somewhat jaundiced).

On a number of issues, however, important differences remain between the SDLP and the Unionists.

(1) Formula on the gap

The SDLP have a number of difficulties with the proposed formula.

First and foremost, they are opposed to the provision whereby the continuation of talks after the election would be conditional on the Conservative Government remaining in office. They are unhappy with the appearance of political partisanship which a public statement containing this provision would confer on all who signed it. They reject what they see as an attempt on the Unionists' part to create leverage for post-election contingencies. They also suspect that, in bowing to this Unionist demand, the Secretary of State is motivated at least in part by the potential it offers for party political advantage over Labour (and, indeed, for enhancing his own political value). They consider that, if there is any genuine uncertainty about the intentions of a future Labour Government in relation to the process, this can be cleared up by means of a public reassurance by the Labour Party (as Kevin McNamara has now given) that, if elected, it will continue the process where it left off prior to the election.

Second, as regards the pre-election gap, they fear that the Unionists may endeavour to prolong Strand One up to the election. They want a clear understanding that the process will move to Strand Two before the election. They wish to see Strand Two launched in the manner envisaged in the 26 March statement (i.e., "within weeks" of the opening of Strand One).

Third, they have some concerns (which, however, they have not pressed unduly) about the implications of a late election, which would make the pre-election gap too long.

Fourth, they approve of the holding of a post-election Conference (though the indications are that this is of somewhat less importance to Hume than satisfaction on the first point above).

(2) Venues

The SDLP have a strong preference for Belfast as the venue for Strand One. (They are flexible on Stormont Castle as an alternative to Stormont Buildings). They are unhappy with the Unionist proposal for an opening meeting at Westminster followed by an undefined number of meetings in 'London' and a move at some point to Belfast.

The SDLP suspect that, behind their ostensible concern with avoiding publicity, the Unionists may hope to make use of a Westminster/London venue in order to advance their own agenda (an agenda already signalled by Molyneaux's proposal some weeks ago for low-intensity contacts at Westminster). However, the strength of SDLP feeling on this issue is not entirely clear. Hume may calculate that, at the end of the day, the Unionists will accept Belfast as the venue for the bulk of the Strand One meetings.

For Strand Two, the SDLP favour the formula agreed on the last occasion (London-Belfast-Dublin). The Unionists accept this but want the opening session in London to last for four or five days. The Secretary of State has indicated to them that they will have to accept a corresponding expansion of the Dublin session and they appear to have acknowledged this.

(3) Size of delegations

The SDLP want to retain the size of delegations at ten, as on the last occasion. They defend this both on practical grounds (the avoidance of breaks during the talks for wider consultations) and for reasons internal to the party (the need to accommodate different views, the geographical spread and the range of different responsibilities within the delegation).

The Unionists want delegations of three for Strand One but are ready to contemplate larger delegations for Strand Two. The Secretary of State hopes to persuade them to accept three to five for Strand One. As Hume has indicated some flexibility in relation to the number of delegates sitting in the room at any one time, a possible compromise might be for the Unionists to accept delegations of varying sizes but with no more than five delegates seated in the room at any one time.

(4) Chairmanship for Strand Two

The SDLP are firmly opposed to any reopening of the chairmanship issue. In private, however, they are inclined to play down the reservations expressed by Paisley under this heading, regarding these as mere posturing prior to an eventual acceptance of Sir Ninian Stephen.