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AMBASÁID NA hÉIREANN, LONDAIN



IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

6 May, 1993.

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Conversation with Seamus Mallon MP

Dear Assistant Secretary,

Brendan McMahon and I had lunch on 5 May with Seamus Mallon. You will be well familiar with most of what he had to say but it might be helpful if we sketched out some of the main points. To set the context I should say that on this particular occasion Seamus was relaxed and jovial having come to London to speak in the Commons debate on the committee of the regions and to vote, if required, in any division which might arise on the report stage of the Maastricht Bill.

Meeting with the Government

He went over again the well trodden ground of the need for the Nationalist side to sit down and agree on what we want and on what we can accept from the talks. The alternative is that we will be left responding to British proposals. In the past this exhortation has been principally directed at the Government but on this occasion Seamus was also concerned about the lack of preparedness on the part of the SDLP.

What he has in mind is that the SDLP and the Government should get together for an open ended meeting to coordinate their approach to the talks. This need not be a daunting task since in most of the key areas the main lines of approach are well known and easily agreed. He freely acknowledged that there would be areas of considerable difficulty viz. security and policing but equally it should prove relatively straightforward to agree common points. The whole exercise could be completed in a day or two and would yield incalculable benefits in terms of our strategy for the next round of talks.

In any case he feels it is time for the SDLP to meet again with the Government. There had only been one meeting since the Government had been formed and a great deal had taken place in the interim.

With regard to the need to be well prepared he made the point, with characteristic vehemence, on several occasions that he simply would not participate unless the SDLP "got its act together" for the resumed talks. He recalled the physical and intellectual burden which he had to bear on the last occasion - leaving meetings late in the evening with the task of preparing a paper for the following morning. He simply was not going to go through that again.

John Hume

Inevitably the subject of the leader's psychological and physical state loomed large in the conversation. He spoke at length about Hume's talks with Sinn Fein. He emphasised that he fully supported Hume's decision to talk to Sinn Fein and felt that the recent meetings had shown some useful movement on the part of Sinn Fein. What disturbed him about the exercise, however, was that the motives behind it might be perceived as less than pure. It was, he said, "a solo run" by Hume and he was concerned that, unlike the last set of talks with Sinn Fein, on this occasion the party as such had not been involved. In that context, there might be a temptation to see the exercise as designed to restore Hume's flagging credibility, to get him back centre-stage and demonstrate that Hume alone could deliver the seemingly impossible objective of delivering peace. No one, for example, could take seriously the idea that the intention had been to keep the meetings secret and that the press release had been forced on them by a journalist's chance sighting of Adams going into Hume's house. Of itself, publicity centred motives did not devalue the exercise but they set the context.

Mallon did not doubt but that the British would exploit the exercise. He even suggested that the British at some suitable level might shortly undertake their own contacts with Sinn Fein. The entire exercise was fraught with danger whichever way it went, not least he warned for the Irish government.

Clearly a great part of Seamus's mistrust of the exercise stems from the inevitable lack of consultation by Hume and from the fact that, as he repeatedly told us, no one in the SDLP knows the mind of the IRA better than Seamus Mallon. On this point he does not doubt but that Adams and a faction within Sinn Fein have edged a good deal forward on past positions. Hume had told him that the IRA were "within a sentence or two" of accepting the substance of the agreed statement put out by himself and Adams. Seamus simply did not believe this. There was no way "the hard men of the IRA" were ready for this. At best Hume's exercise would help dislodge a portion of Sinn Fein.

Another concern of Mallon's when he spoke of Hume's solo run was that no gap should be allowed to develop between the SDLP and Dublin. Any such gap would be highly detrimental to the interests of constitutional nationalism.

The NIO team

He was withering in his comments on Sir Patrick and the NIO ministerial team. He was utterly dismissive of Jeremy Hanley and Robert Atkins telling us that their performance made him nostalgic for Brian Mawhinney. Hanley was getting more pompous and patronising by the day. He never thought he would say it but he recently found himself admitting that Michael Mates was by far and away the best of them. One knew where one stood with him, he seemed ready to admit his errors and on occasion to learn from his mistakes.

He was more measured when speaking of Mayhew but made no secret of his growing dislike and mistrust of him. He told us that this view of him is shared by civil servants at Stormont. Three of the epithets which cropped up most frequently in conversation were ambitious, arrogant and insensitive. He was especially critical of his Liverpool speech. His most telling criticism of this was that it clearly demonstrated

The Press
Generally
except
Hume
Sally
6/5

that the British had departed from the spirit of 26 March and that it would be Mayhew, rather than both Governments jointly, who would be convening the next round of talks. They have as he said "the bit firmly between their teeth".

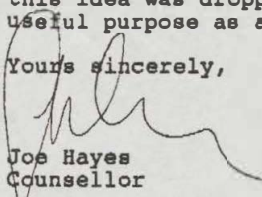
Seamus agreed that there are two opposing views of the NIO team depending on ones perspective. From a Westminster standpoint for example Mayhew was seen to be doing well, to be in command, capable of delivering and enjoying the trust of the Prime Minister. Similarly, Hanley was believed to be doing a good job and to have an understanding of the Irish - an impression resting on the flimsy anecdotal evidence of his command of Irish, his attendance at Croke Park, his sojourn in Dublin and his ability to churn out entertaining mimicry of Paisley and others.

Seamus's bleak view of the NIO team has to be set against the fact that he clearly feels himself to be very much on the outside. He told us about a recent flight to Heathrow which he and Joe Hendron shared with Hanley and Atkins. At the airport both Ministers together and separately pressed Hendron to accept a lift into London. Hendron protested that he would stay with his friend and colleague. Even this failed to evoke the offer of a lift for Seamus who in any case released Hendron from his dilemma by telling him to take the lift. Hendron duly departed with Hanley who spent the journey telling him about the need to do what he could to help get the talks restarted. This episode reveals something about the personal and political traits of all involved.

The Talks

Predictably he has a fairly pessimistic and cynical view of the process. He has no doubt that it will start again but will in his view go nowhere. He touched on the question of the SDLP's strand one proposal for an external Commissioner. He made very clear, in a manner which was new to both Brendan McMahon and myself, his view that this was a badly thought out non starter. The British were torn between taking it seriously and dismissing it as a negotiating ploy - "a well placed road-block". Their approach was influenced by their uncertainty as to how seriously the Irish Government took it. They suspected that we didn't think too much of it either but were reluctant to say so. It was difficult to fathom where Seamus's argument was leading but he was clear that he would feel no grief if this idea was dropped, though he did concede that it might serve a useful purpose as a short to medium term roadblock.

Yours sincerely,



Joe Hayes
Counsellor