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Reference Code: 2021/95/32

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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT

BÉAL FEIRSTE

BELFAST

23 February, 1993

Confidential

Mr. Sean O hUiginn
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin 2.

Dear Assistant Secretary

Dinner with Quentin Thomas

The Deputy Secretary in charge of political affairs in the NIO, Quentin Thomas, and the British Joint Secretary, Martin Williams, joined Sean Farrell and myself for dinner in the Secretariat last evening.

Irish Contacts with Unionists

Thomas was interested in our contacts with the Unionists. I said we would have an opportunity to brief him on that subject at the meeting of the Liaison Group which we arranged today for 5 March in London. Thomas suggested mildly that we had rubbed Molyneaux up the wrong way by a public invitation to talks after the last Conference. He offered the general comment that Molyneaux loves conspiratorial nods and winks, arranging one thing in private while maintaining the opposite in a public facade and so on. I said we were, of course, aware of that tendency but it was also important to be seen to reach out to Unionists, to make it clear that we were keen to get into talks, and to try to promote public support for a resumption of the process. (In fact, at the Conference, John Chilcot made the point that our contacts with Unionists should not be too low-key and out of view.)

Reassertion of British Approach to the Talks

Thomas gave a firm re-assertion of the modest line of approach in the last round, as did Minister Hanley recently (letter of 9 February). At one stage, he expressed regret that it had been thought necessary to mention the Forum Report - which he would regard as much too ambitious - in the Programme for Government; at another, he stressed the importance of experience in "running things", suggesting that the British Home Office/MoD/NIO group that has run Northern Ireland for the past twenty years does have such experience and hinting that they are in a better position than ourselves or the American Congress, or for that matter the Cabinet Office or Foreign Office, to assess what is needed and what can be made to work.

These remarks were made slightly tongue-in-cheek but they represent what Thomas believes. He is by no means indifferent to the problem of Northern Ireland but he is a long distance manager in the Home Office style who will respond rather than initiate. In short, he would not be one of those whom the American Ambassador in London, Ray Seitz, identified in Belfast last weekend as "willing to take history by the scruff of the neck". Oddly perhaps, he and others on the English side of the Office may be more cautious than the Northern Ireland civil service team led by David Fell who suggests that he stiffens Mayhew against propitiating the Unionists.

Forthcoming Speech by Mayhew

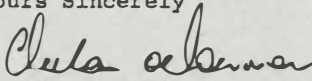
We were told here some time ago that the Secretary of State is likely to make a speech reaffirming the parameters of British policy. We have enquired a number of times about it and asked Thomas and Williams again last evening.

Thomas said a speech was likely to be made in the next week or so and that it would be a back-to-first-principles speech such as that made by Peter Brooke at Bangor in January 1990 which is generally thought to have laid the initial basis for the talks. I attach a summary. Reading over the speech today, I was struck by its cajolery of Unionists, by its emphasis on a workable and acceptable model of devolution with an appropriate and fair role for both majority and minority, and by its assertion that Article 4 of the Agreement did not give the Irish Government a veto on devolved powers. By contrast, the agreed statement of 26 March 1991 which is the foundation stone of the talks, deals with all three relationships equally and establishes the principle of nothing agreed until everything agreed.

I mentioned the tone of the Bangor speech to Martin Williams today, asking if he and Thomas had intended to signal that a pro-Unionist speech was on the way and reminding him of the important developments in both Governments' positions since 1990. He said the draft under preparation was Bangor-like in the sense of a first principles speech, but it would not be a reiteration; it would certainly draw in the achievements gained in the statement of 26 March 1991 and, of course, in the talks themselves. Williams acknowledged, however, that there would be an attempt to be sensitive to Unionists in their present mood; the speech would aim not to antagonise. He also said the speech was by no means finalised.

I have sent some thoughts separately on the issues as the British may see them.

Yours Sincerely



Declan O'Donovan
Joint Secretary

Summary of Peter Brooke's Bangor Speech, 7/1/1990

- understand Unionists' overriding concern to see the Union preserved;
- understand, if do not share, Unionist feelings about the Agreement;
- emphasis by Unionists on need to share more fully in decision-taking whether at Westminster or locally;
- SDLP also stressing advantages of devolution;
- devolution has been British policy for last twenty years; real need for powers to be devolved;
- not true that Irish Government have a veto on powers to be devolved through Article 4 of Agreement;
- Unionists accept there needs to be a good and neighbourly relationship between any new administration and the Republic, and a similarly good relationship between the UK and the Republic;
- major issues are: need for workable and acceptable arrangements for exercise of devolved powers; need for democratic institutions giving appropriate weight to majority and minority aspirations and views; question how to acknowledge legitimate interests of Irish Government within Northern Ireland without dilution of UK sovereignty; and question of local contribution to security matters;
- NI will not cease to be part of UK without consent of a majority...seems unlikely in foreseeable future...that is reality which all constitutional politicians in NI accept;
- broad criteria for devolved institutions are that they should be workable, stable, durable, have widespread support and provide an appropriate and fair role for both sides of community;
- discussions would need to embrace devolution, North-South relationship and wider relationship between the two islands;
- Agreement can be operated sensitively in interest of bringing about talks (the idea of the gap);
- any new agreement would have substantial implications for Anglo-Irish Agreement.