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Dinner with British Cabinet Secretary,
Sir Robin Butler

W Mc Carthy
(on return)

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At Sir Robin Butler's invitation, I had dinner with him in London on 29 March. I have known him since 1973 when we both attended the Sunningdale Conference, he as Prime Minister Heath's Private Secretary. Despite his involvement on and off since then in Anglo-Irish affairs, his level of interest in and knowledge of the detail of what is happening is considerably less than that of his predecessor Lord Armstrong. Indeed, he seemed anxious to avoid any serious discussion of Anglo-Irish issues until the arrival of Sir John Chilcot, NI Permanent Under Secretary of State, who had been in Dublin the same day for a meeting with the Secretary of the Department of Justice. The following are the main points which arose in the course of the discussion.

Talks with Sinn Féin

The Prime Minister believes that he has been sufficiently humiliated by Sinn Féin and is not prepared to have the word 'demilitarisation' appear on an agenda for political level talks. He does, however, wish to move talks with Sinn Féin to the political level as quickly as possible but not in a way which would add to his current difficulties with unionist and some backbench conservative MPs. Sinn Féin will simply have to find another word. While he might have wished to have the issue resolved before his visit to the United States, the Prime Minister was now inclined to the view that more time was needed. The timing in any event was more related to the Washington Investment Conference than to the Prime Minister's visit. They wished to ensure that the Northern Ireland Secretary of

State and Adams would have shaken hands in advance of the Washington Conference at which both will be present. That implied Ancram level contacts in April followed by Mayhew level contacts in May. It would be embarrassing if the handshake had not taken place before the Conference.

Short-term progress

Once political level talks with Sinn Féin got underway and the dust had settled, it was then the British intention to seek bi-lateral talks starting with the main unionist parties. Butler said the Prime Minister was pessimistic about restoring a serious relationship with Molyneaux. Their general view was that substantive, political engagement with the UUP was virtually impossible as long as Molyneaux remained in charge. He had been deeply wounded by the Joint Framework Document and there was now no personal relationship between him and the Prime Minister.

Both Butler and Chilcot speculated that John Taylor was moving up fast in the UUP ranks. They reminded me that during the 1992 Northern Ireland talks, he did not figure in his party's ten member team but now he was in the top three and might well be the leader with whom we could all do a deal, despite his very erratic past. They did not believe that Molyneaux was sufficiently in control of the party to ensure that Ross would succeed him. Smith was weak and indecisive, Maginnis was scattered and Burnside lacked both gravitas and essential rural support.

They would appreciate anything that we might be able to do to encourage the SDLP and the UUP to develop a better relationship. That relationship would be the central partnership in any new Northern Ireland arrangements and while they

appreciate the efforts John Hume was making to develop a dialogue with Molyneaux, they thought he should try to broaden it out to include potential successors.

The Security Situation

Chilcot expressed himself as particularly happy with the meeting he had just concluded with the Secretary of the Department of Justice and said there was very little difference between them in their assessment of the current situation. Butler expressed particular admiration for the discipline which the republican leadership had shown since the cessation of violence and said that the Prime Minister had simply not believed last August that the organisation was capable of such discipline. Only as the months went on, did he come to believe fully what Albert Reynolds had told him in the days leading up to the cessation and his respect for the former Taoiseach was now considerable!

Anglo-Irish Relations

Butler's theme of the evening was that everything possible should be done to avoid surprises and divisions between Dublin and London. What the Prime Minister feared most was not any difference that might emerge between himself and the Taoiseach but that he would be caught off-guard by developments in the situation. In reply to my query, Butler said that the Prime Minister had been taken by surprise at least twice in recent times, firstly at the pace and enthusiasm with which Albert Reynolds embraced Adams and Sinn Féin after the cessation of violence and secondly, when a gap opened up between Dublin and London recently in relation to the handling of the visit to the US by Adams. The Prime Minister accepted that differences of emphasis and even of substance were inevitable as between the two capitals but he would like to see a better management of any differences and preferably before they became public. When

I asked if there were any specific suggestions that he wished conveyed, the reply was in the negative but Butler did say he thought that more frequent telephone calls between the Taoiseach and Prime Minister might provide the main part of the answer. He added that the Prime Minister was entirely comfortable with the personal relationship that had emerged at and following the December Summit. It was obviously important to ensure that such Summits took place on a regular basis, even when there were no major items for resolution.

The US Dimension

Perhaps because of my own past involvement in the US but also because of genuine puzzlement, Butler focussed for some time on why the US administration was so involved and why we felt the involvement of Washington to be so important. The US card is clearly a major irritant and the role of Senator Kennedy and - to my surprise - particularly of that of Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith in Dublin are particularly resented. Somewhat, disparaging remarks were made about the role of Ambassador Kennedy-Smith and I was asked if there was nothing we could do to keep her in check. I had difficulty in persuading them to see any positive element in the US role even when I reminded them that without the support of people like Senator Kennedy, we would never over the years have been able to keep the level of US support for the Provisional IRA at the relatively low level at which it had been kept.

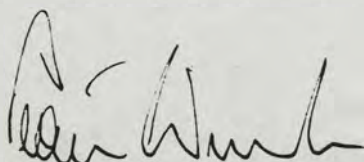
Internal British Government Tensions

My interlocutors were surprisingly frank about the very negative role on Irish matters being played by the Home Secretary. They are seriously concerned that his attitude, for example, on prison issues might at some point in the future disrupt the whole peace process and, by implication, they suggested that the Prime Minister was reluctant to take him on. Howard was portrayed as having

bad feelings towards everything connected with Ireland and we should be particularly conscious of this when it came to matters involving Irish prisoners in British jails.

EU Issues

Butler was very conscious of the Irish Presidency in the second half of next year and speculated that this would be a period of particular political sensitivity for the Prime Minister who would either be in the run-in to a general election or might even call a general election late in 1996. The temptation to do so before the IGC issues were resolved and play on fears that Labour would be weak on some central issues was strong. Butler said he looked forward to the usual adroit Irish handling of its EU Presidency and suspected that we would need all our skills to ensure that Britain remained "mainly on board" while the EU moved to its next phase.



Seán Donlon

30 March, 1995.

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