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Private Secretary
The Times will want to make this read-out of recent
Mayhew / Trimble meeting as conveyed to - and reported by -
David Donaghy.

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UUP (18 and 21 December). S. Dave 4.1.96.

The Secretary of State met David Trimble on 18 December (not 19 December as previously reported). John Taylor and Martin Smyth were also present (the former only for part of the meeting).

As previously reported, the meeting began with a row about the Celtic design of a new pound coin. There was also a row about alleged bias in favour of the Irish Government and neglect of Unionist sensitivities in the matter of public appointments. Trimble asked why Unionists did not receive notification of the "A" and "B" public appointments (as the Irish Government did). The Secretary of State asked the UUP leader to put his complaints on paper. He recalled that he had written to Trimble at one stage in response to complaints made by the latter about Housing Executive appointments. He had also written to the UUP about three years ago asking them to furnish a full list of candidates for public appointments but had received no reply, either then or when he sent a reminder about 18 months ago.

Trimble, who had become somewhat agitated during this discussion, calmed down somewhat following Taylor's departure to catch a flight. He turned his attention to a number of matters relating to Parliamentary procedure. Trimble complained that the recent public expenditure decisions for Northern Ireland were announced by means of a press release, whereas the equivalent decisions for Scotland and Wales were communicated through Parliamentary statements. He also asked why the procedures for the handling of Scottish business could not be adopted for Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State said he would look into these matters.

Trimble underlined his desire to "start the ball rolling" in relation to political dialogue. He represented his Assembly proposal as the only means of getting Sinn

Fein and Unionist together under one roof. He was conscious of the need to bring the SDLP on board in this respect but felt that pressure from Dublin and Washington would achieve this. He did not believe that the International Body would resolve the decommissioning issue and feared that "we'll all be back in the trenches" by the end of February. That was why he was pushing his own proposal.

From his meeting with the DUP, it was clear to Trimble that the DUP would be willing to meet Sinn Fein in an elected body, taking part in officially sponsored committees though not in "secret negotiations behind closed doors". He was trying to find an alternative to the word "Assembly" - in deference, he told the Secretary of State, to SDLP sensitivities. He thought that some legislation would be needed but did not expect this to be contentious. It would, however, have to be in place by the end of February (in line with the twin-track timetable). He envisaged elections taking place in May. This should carry things through the marching season and the body could start business in September. The reaching of the second anniversary of the cease fire would enable Sinn Fein to tell their "hard men" that progress was still being made.

Asked about the SDLP view of his proposal, Trimble said that Mallon had raised a number of questions at their meeting but that Hume had remained silent.

Martin Smyth expressed reservations about the DUP proposal for elections based on the list system. This would give Paisley, Hume and Adams too high a profile. He went on to suggest that participation in an elected body would challenge Sinn Fein. The latter had, however, moved a long way from pure abstentionism.

David Fell, who was also present, asked what the UUP's attitude would be towards Sinn Fein in an elected body. Trimble said that it would be broadly similar to that of the DUP. It would depend, of course, on progress made in relation to decommissioning and other issues. The UUP would still be seeking a commitment to exclusively political methods. An election would force Sinn Fein where they stood on this and re-educate them in the realities of the situation.

As for the SDLP, he believed that John Hume would never agree of his own volition to an elected body. He would, however, be susceptible to pressure from Dublin, Washington and his own party.

The Alliance leader, Trimble noted, agreed with the UUP on "practically everything".

Neither Trimble nor Smyth saw the problem of election manifestos as significant, as everyone would know the views of all the parties.

The Secretary of State asked how Trimble envisaged the move from an elected body onwards to substantive negotiations. Trimble said it would be unwise to be too specific at this stage. In the 1975 Convention a lot of progress was made through an evolutionary rather than a prescriptive process.

He understood Dublin's concern that it might be left out. He did not necessarily regard the body as a vehicle for all-party talks. It could, however, prepare the ground for these talks and take evidence, either in plenary or through committees. This could include taking evidence from "the Republic" on issues such as North/South cooperation.

The Secretary of State emphasized the need to avoid ideas which would be perceived as promoting an internal settlement. He himself had to be very cautious given Irish Government and nationalist sensitivities. It would be better if the UUP and the SDLP could take this forward together in private discussions.

Trimble suggested that his ideas could be packaged in a way which would make them agreeable to nationalists.

On Thursday 21 December, Michael Ancram had a further meeting with Trimble. (he was accompanied by Stephen Leach and Trimble by John Hunter). The meeting was judged a constructive and valuable one with Trimble in more buoyant form than earlier in the week. The British view was that the UUP leader's thinking on his Assembly proposal was evolving in a helpful direction.

Ancram put it to Trimble that, although he was displaying sensitivity to minority concerns in a number of areas (e.g. his willingness to consider a significant engagement with Sinn Fein before the nominal start of negotiations), he was underestimating the depth of nationalist and Irish Government reservations about an elected body.

There followed a detailed questioning of Trimble on his proposal which elicited the following responses.

Three-stranded approach

Trimble accepts that any elected body must address all three strands.

Name of body

He accepts that nationalists will resist both "Assembly" and probably "Convention". Ancram suggested "Electoral College" and Trimble seemed happy with this.

Modus operandi

He envisages mainly committees, composed in proportion to party strengths, with a remit to enquire into, and take evidence on, any issue relevant to the peace process. In the first instance, this would include North/South cooperation, policing, the internal governance of NI and human rights. However, as the body might have to "mark time" for a lengthy period until para 10 of the JD was satisfied, a somewhat wider agenda (unspecified) would have to be drawn up.

The committee reports should be collations of factual material without judgements or recommendations (as this would clearly divide the parties and anticipate the substantive talks). An important benefit would be to enable the Irish Government to be associated with the process. To facilitate this, the committees should be empowered to take evidence in the Republic. There should also be provision for the full body to invite the Irish Government, among others, to attend and participate in its debates.

The body as negotiating forum

Ancram noted that Trimble seemed to envisage the body creating conditions for substantive talks but not necessarily playing a role in these. This contrasted with the DUP and Alliance who saw the body as a forum for substantive talks. Was there a case for allowing the body to make substantive decisions and recommendations in areas where it could achieve unanimity?

Trimble agreed it was valuable to keep all options open - but it was equally important not to force the committees to bring matters to a conclusion and thereby to expose rifts between the parties. In any case, it would be impossible for a committee to negotiate collectively with the Irish Government on Strand Two as its members would have radically different positions. When the conditions were right, "members" might indeed conduct substantive negotiations - but this would be on behalf of their parties and probably outside the context of the body itself.

Timble commented that the whole purpose of the body would be to fudge the issue of what was substantive negotiations and what was not. "We would be negotiating without saying so". Ideally, the final stage of formal substantive negotiations would be brief and would only occur when the agreed outcome had been pre-cooked.

Method of election

Trimble is completely opposed to a list system ("non-negotiable").

He floated the idea of MPs and MEPs being automatically members of the body (with a disingenuous reference to the attractions of this for Hume, who dislikes elections, and for Paisley).

Conduct of negotiations

Criticising the sequential approach of 1991-92 as a mistake, he envisages a holistic approach with everything on the table at the same time.

Anglo-Irish Agreement

Accepting that Strand Three would be within the body's remit, Trimble wants to see the AIA replaced ("a key issue for Unionists").

When it was put to him that a "gap" between Conference meetings would not be required if all the parties had specific electoral mandates, he indicated some dissent on this. Ancram said that, according to Alderdice, Paisley had said that he had no problems even if the IGC were to meet three times a day during the operation of an elected body. He told Trimble that this issue would have to be revisited.

Independent Chairman of body

Trimble saw some merit in this as a means of avoiding partisan elections from within the body. Ancram pointed out that the Irish Government would wish to have a role in selecting such a figure. Trimble said that this would be unacceptable (as any suggestion of joint management of the process was problematic for him).

It was agreed that one option might be to make separate provision for an independent chairman for (a) the body and (b) the subsequent talks. The Irish Government could have a say on the latter and in practice the same person could be appointed to both positions.

Trimble also envisaged that informal substantive talks might not require a chairman.

Duration

He envisages a two-year life span to take the body beyond the next Westminster and Dáil elections.

He believes that Hume will hold off from any substantive negotiations until after these two events (in the hope of a better deal from, respectively, a Labour and Fianna Fail-led Government).

Decision-taking

Trimble argued against a provision for weighted majority voting, claiming that this would be relevant to an Assembly with powers but not to a body whose purpose is eventual broad agreement. Ancram said that to dispense with this might reinforce nationalist fears about majority rule.

It was agreed that the British Government would attempt to write a paper summarising the UUP position on a body as outlined by Trimble.