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Reference Code: 2021/100/19

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Sec Gallagher

Meeting of Roundtable of Northern Ireland Parties, Stormont, 29 October 1998

- 1 I got a read-out on the above this evening from Seamus Mallon (briefly), and his Special Advisers, Colm Larkin and Hugh Logue, and on Sinn Fein's perspective from Aidan McAteer. The morning session on Departmental structures went well, but the afternoon session on North/South areas for co-operation and implementation was considerably more problematic. It was agreed that the Roundtable would resume its deliberations on Monday morning.

Departmental Structures

- 2 The session was held in a business-like atmosphere - Larkin's word was "focussed" The UUP sought to drag out the issue of the number of Departments, but, at the same time, common ground was established on several points, viz
 - there was broad agreement that there should be a strong "centre" (ie the Office of the First and Deputy First Ministers);
 - there should be Junior Ministers (no discussion on how many);
 - eight broad areas were identified as being common to every party's list (I did not get a read on what they were; Larkin told me that Trimble, while not dissenting from eight, was arguing that Finance should be handled by the centre. Nobody else agreed);
 - there were about five other functions "floating around", such as Training, Social Security etc, which needed to be slotted in, either as separate Departments in their own right or coupled with other areas.
- 3 It was agreed at the end of the discussion that David Ferguson (Head of the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister) would over lunch draw up a summary issues paper, based on the morning's exchanges, with a view to returning to the matter, time permitting, in the afternoon (in the event, the matter was not reverted to today - see below).
- 4 Larkin felt that real progress was made on narrowing the gap between parties on the matter and that, despite continued UUP resistance, it is now practically inevitable that the final configuration will involve 10 Departments. He said that Trimble had done a skilful and constructive job in steering the discussion. It was

subsequently agreed that the discussion on Departments would resume on Monday morning at 11.30am.

North/South

5. The atmosphere for the afternoon session was considerably more testy - Mallon described it as "appalling". From the outset, Trimble indicated that he was effectively vacating the chair and donning his UUP hat. He spent the first 20 minutes of the meeting "tirading" on the nature of Implementation Bodies, with particular focus on Tourism. He asked a series of questions - What would the Bodies would do? How would they be defined? How would the identity of Northern Ireland be protected to ensure that it was not "swallowed up" by the South? On Tourism, he said that there were real fears that the South might seek to promote its own industry at the expense of the North's.
6. Mallon felt that it was necessary to go on the offensive in response, and "counterpunched" by putting the SDLP list on the table, with particular focus on an "irreducible minimum" of three major Implementation Bodies - Tourism, Trade Promotion/Business Development/Inward Investment and EU Programmes. Trimble accepted that these would all need to be looked (although railing somewhat against inward investment, he did not reject it out of hand and it was agreed as one of the issues to receive further consideration). Trimble said that he favoured Inland Waterways. Mallon suggested that it was not weighty enough (this is largely tactics on his part; as we know from our discussion with him last night, he accepts that it will probably be on the final list).
7. The SDLP felt that Trimble's UUP colleagues (Empey and Taylor) were taken aback at the line Trimble was taken. Empey suggested that the discussion should not be minuted and that there should be a free-flowing exchange on the issues. David Ervine played a positive role - he argued in favour of Tourism, for instance, if it could be shown there was value-added.
8. As the discussion proceeded, it was agreed that they would look further at several areas. There was broad convergence on four of these
 - Tourism (despite Trimble's reservations, it remains firmly on the table and has not been formally vetoed by the UUP),
 - EU Programmes (to the SDLP 's - and our - surprise, there was no real resistance to the notion of such a Body),
 - Inland Waterways
 - Strategic Transport Planning
9. Logue said that there was agreement that, in addition, nine other areas be looked at further:

- Trade Promotion/Business Development/Inward Investment
 - Energy
 - Environment
 - Training and *Employment*
 - Irish Language, Culture and Arts (SF/SDLP)
 - Education (apparently at the suggestion of the Women's Coalition - they have in mind Teacher and Student Exchanges, but it is not expected to be a runner)
 - The Development of Carlingford Lough (UUP)
 - The Development of Lough Foyle (UUP)
 - Food Safety (UUP)
10. Larkin said that Sinn Fein (Bairbre de Brún and Mitchel McLaughlin) were quiet, "cagey" and did not intervene much. Logue saw their role as constructive. He told me that Bairbre de Brún said to him afterwards that it had been a very good session. She was very pleased that the SDLP's top four areas coincided with their own and were substantial.
11. Larkin said that it was not clear how they would take the North/South discussions further. There was agreement that further work was needed on the above areas, but no definitive arrangements have been made for another session on the matter (it may be that it will be included in Monday's session). Interestingly, Larkin is arguing that this work should not be referred back to the Northern officials, but rather should be kept at the political level. It is not clear either as to whether the two Governments should meet with the Northern side on Monday as provisionally planned. A potentially serious complication has arisen in that Trimble is insisting that he and Mallon alone should meet with the Governments. Mallon told me that there was no way he would agree to that (I told him that neither could we). This remains to be resolved.

Sinn Fein Perspective

12. I got a read-out on Sinn Fein's perspective on the day from Aidan McAteer. He confirmed that they viewed the day overall in positive terms. There had been a good discussion on Departments in the morning and the point was not far off when parties could sign off on a final configuration. Indeed, they regarded this as the principal reason for what they saw as Trimble's filibuster in the afternoon. Their read is that Trimble dragged out the North/South discussion to avoid having to return to the Departments (as at one point planned - see above), because he did not wish to be in a position of having to concede that agreement was in sight. If he did that, movement to the Shadow Executive (via the D'Hondt procedure) would become more difficult to resist.
13. On the North/South discussions, McAteer said, that Trimble's performance besides, it was a "significant exercise" and that progress was made. A real engagement had begun on the areas. They had argued for the discussions to be continued tomorrow (Friday) and over the weekend, but Trimble would not agree.

14. McAteer said that they are looking forward to their discussions with us and the SDLP tomorrow in Belfast. He said that they would be fielding Bairbre de Brún, Conor Murphy, Dara O'Hagan and himself.

Comment

// 15. Overall, there is reason to believe that the day went more positively than we might have expected. Trimble's performance in the afternoon was a worry and his line on the format for the meeting with the Governments is particularly disturbing. On the other hand, there was real engagement on both the structures and the North/South to an extent we have not seen before. Regarding the North/South, all the major areas on the list of the SDLP, Sinn Fein and ourselves are now firmly in play. There is clearly a long way to go before agreement, but the game is at least fully on.

16. The situation regarding Sinn Fein is also a little more encouraging. As you know, when I was conveying to McAteer this morning that we had reached agreement with Seamus Mallon on arrangements for a tripartite meeting between themselves, the SDLP and ourselves, I also passed on Mallon's request that they (SF) not spend today "kicking Trimble, because if they do, by extension, they are kicking me". They appear to have taken Mallon's request on board in terms of how they handled the meeting. They were obviously encouraged by the tough line Mallon himself took on the substance. Tomorrow's meeting with them will provide a further opportunity to reinforce their engagement in the initiative and obviate any sense of isolation.

17. We will need to reflect carefully on the timing and arrangements for a meeting between the Northern side and the Government. Clearly, it is essential first to sort out the issue of the Northern team. If that can be done, the other questions will come into play. Mallon believes that heavy pressure needs to be brought to bear on // Trimble in order to get him to move on the North/South issues and my sense is that he (Mallon) will favour the earliest possible meeting. We also need to consider how to deploy our officials from the other Departments (we have them on standby for the weekend).

TOC

T O'Connor
29 October 1998