

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Reference Code:	2022/45/645
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Dinner with Séamus Mallon, Newry, 24 November 1999

1. The objective of the meeting was to see if an honourable way could be found around the difficulty of Mallon returning as Deputy First Minister. While somewhat resistant, and clearly frustrated by the (unavoidable) side-lining of the SDLP over the Review period, he did not demur when I emphasised that I could see no one else in the party leadership filling the post at the present time. Secondly, he had paid a heavy personal and political price in helping to ensure, by his resignation, that there would be a meaningful review process. Against this background, the compelling logic was for him to return as Deputy First Minister.

2. We discussed a number of ways in which Mallon could be reinstated without going through a new election, which would require a majority of 50% plus one within each community. Given the likely slippage in the UUP, this was not now realisable. However, and while this level of support was necessary under the Agreement for the election of Trimble and Mallon, the Agreement is silent on what happens in the case of a resignation and the same person being prepared to return to office.

3. In the circumstances, we agreed that the best way forward might be through a Standing Order from the Secretary of State (in the pre-devolution period, the Assembly is regulated by British Standing Orders, even down to scheduling meetings). The Standing Order in question would be along the lines that, if the Assembly endorsed a motion stating that they did not wish the resignation of the Deputy First Minister to stand, Mallon would effectively be back in office. (A vote for this purpose would require an overall majority of 60%, including

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40% in both the nationalist and the unionist groups.)

4. A particular attraction of the above, apart from the lower and hopefully realisable electoral bar, is that the vote in the Assembly provides Mallon with an honourable way back.

Mallon guarantee

5. Mallon also said that he had been approached by the British Prime Minister earlier that day to see if he would repeat the guarantee, made at the 1998 SDLP Conference, to exclude Sinn Féin if there was not delivery on decommissioning. Blair stressed that this would be very helpful in getting John Taylor on board. While Mallon did not give an outright refusal to the Prime Minister, his strong instinct is to firmly rule this out when he calls the Prime Minister back.

Shadow North-South Ministerial Council

6. Mallon felt that the Shadow Council meeting on the 1st December should be very short and low-key. It was exclusively required, for (Irish) constitutional reasons, to enable signing off on the Implementation Bodies. Mallon's view was that, if either side tried to hype this, it would look decidedly odd, and in particular take away from the huge historical significance of the first formal meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council in Armagh later in the month.

Dermot Gallagher
25 November 1999

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