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HCS/4/28

cc. PS/PUS B&L -M
Dr Quigley

PS/Secretary of State (B&L) -M

MEETING IN DUBLIN : 9 APRIL 1986

1. As I have already reported to the Secretary of State, Dr Quigley and I visited Dublin on 9 April for further discussions with Messrs Nally and Donlon. Mr O'Tuathil was also present on this occasion.
2. Almost all of our time together was taken up with an exploration of the prospects for getting some political dialogue involving the Northern Ireland parties under way. The Secretary of State will recall that, as I reported at the time, Mr Donlon had told me after the last meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference in Belfast of the willingness of the Irish Government to consider in principle some sort of "pause" in the work of the Conference if we considered that this would be helpful to get dialogue under way and that there appeared to be reasonable prospects of a constructive outcome of such dialogue. It was clear at our meeting in Dublin that in the meantime Irish officials had been giving some thought to forms of words which might be acceptable to them in such circumstances. Donlon spoke of "giving a priority to talks on devolution".
3. Nally summed up the Irish position as follows. Any formula would have to make it clear that the Agreement itself stood. The Maryfield Secretariat would have to remain in place. Business currently in hand (eg, the work of the subordinate groups) would have to continue. Subject to these understandings they believed that the Agreement, in terms of the timetable for planning Conference meetings, could be implemented sensitively, perhaps in terms of no meeting at all for a reasonable period, or at any rate no meeting in Belfast.
4. However the Irish would not want to see the "formula" card played and thrown away. Ideally the position should be "pre-cooked" in terms of a prior understanding that an offer of talks would be taken up. They would also need to consider whether those participating in talks would have any real prospect of delivering any subsequent agreement to which they were parties.
5. The Irish stressed that, although the Agreement allowed them to put forward views and proposals on the modalities of devolution, they would not regard this as involving any obligation to include them as a party in round-table discussions with Northern Ireland parties.
6. It was made clear to us that not only have the Irish (as one would have expected) been keeping in close touch with developments in Northern Ireland, through the Secretariat and otherwise, but they have also been approached by a number of prominent Northern Ireland people from the unionist community flying distress

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signals, and sounding them out on the possibility of the Irish being willing to accept some flexibility in the implementation of the Agreement in the interests of promoting dialogue. They have been giving some of these contacts the clear message that they would be willing to contemplate some demonstration of flexibility in the right circumstances. These messages were already being reflected in statements made by a number of Northern Ireland people (for example the President of the Methodist Conference).

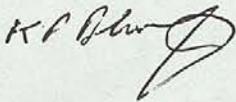
7. An interesting piece of information given to us was that the UUP approach to the SDLP (which I foreshadowed in my report on the discussions with Mr West and others) has now gone ahead. Some sort of letter has been received by the SDLP and is likely to be considered by its party leadership this weekend. The Irish seem to anticipate a cautiously positive response.
8. We went on to discuss in some detail the present attitudes and possible future reactions of the unionist community. We warned that it was only realistic to accept that in all foreseeable circumstances there could well be an irreducible level of obdurate resistance unlikely to be influenced by the opening of, or any foreseeable outcome of, inter-party dialogue. Although the DUP was, as a party, more committed in principle to devolution than the UUP, the influence of Robinson could make it very difficult to involve that party in dialogue on acceptable terms. It had, nevertheless, been interesting to note some modification in Robinson's tone the previous day (including an attempt to present the Prime Minister as the main current obstacle to progress; an obvious attempt to make mischief by division). UUP reaction was difficult to project, given the continuing schizophrenia in that party as between devolution and integration. But certainly a growing number of people in the UUP seemed to be demonstrating a growing anxiety to get into dialogue.
9. We said that while the beginning of direct talks between the UUP and the SDLP would, if it proceeded, be a constructive development, all our experience left us somewhat sceptical about the ability of Northern Ireland parties to make any substantial progress without the presence and pressure of the British Government. Nor was it by any means clear that a breach between the UUP and DUP - in terms of the first coming into dialogue and perhaps ultimately into power sharing, with the latter staying out - while superficially attractive, would lead in the longer run to a more stable situation. Apart from anything else we could not know at this stage how the unionist electorate would divide as between the two parties at an election to any future Assembly.
10. We therefore ventured the view that it could be unrealistic to take the position that no move should be made until one was absolutely sure of a favourable outcome; this could mean never moving at all.
11. It was evident that the Irish would be anxious about attempts by the unionist parties indefinitely to extend any "window" in the programme of the Conference. There would be a fear that they would drag things out, reach no real agreement, keep hopes of future concessions alive and play for more time. It would therefore be important not to be seen to be pushing the work of the Conference back indefinitely, but rather to be revealing to the Northern Ireland parties a timetable for its future working which would in practice allow a reasonable period for inter-party talks to get under way and to give them that degree of priority which would be justified in terms of the

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commitment of both Governments to devolution.

12. Overall it was clear that the Irish are closely in touch with the situation, well informed about most aspects of it, and anxious to be helpful. They would clearly be willing to address constructively any formula we might wish them to consider, and I do not think it inconceivable that they may actually press us on the need to break the present deadlock.
13. The only other substantive matter upon which we touched - and that fairly briefly - was the question of EC aid. They re-emphasised their view that we were missing out on a great opportunity to obtain really substantial Community help, referring to a suggestion by Commissioner Sutherland that 500m ECUs could be available. We reiterated in turn that UK Ministers had reached a firm decision not to break normal additionality rules. We were asked how our Government would react to the idea of a direct approach to individual Community countries for support for the International Fund. We replied that our impression was that British Ministers would not be keen on being involved in passing the begging bowl round individual Community members.



K P BLOOMFIELD

10 April 1986

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