

MEETING WITH SECRETARY OF STATE, STORMONT CASTLE 23 FEBRUARY 1976

PRESENT: Chairman Secretary of State
Dr Oliver Sir Frank Cooper
Mr Blackburn Mr Murray Stewart
Dr Hayes

1. Secretary of State asked Chairman for a report on the factual position in relation to the Convention, the Chairman said that the inter-party talks had come to an end. He had been advised by Alliance and UUUC that there was no further point in continuing talks in his belief the recall of the Convention had served no useful purpose and had indeed hardened attitudes. The real break came when SDLP and UUUC had stopped talking on 12 February. He had thought it advisable to keep the talks going so as not to appear to concede that the Convention had failed once SDLP had broken off talks. Alliance and UUUC had continued to talk and had had a series of six talks at the end of which they had advised him of their inability to agree.
2. The factual position was that there should now be a meeting of the Business Committee probably on Thursday of this week leading to a plenary session on Monday or Tuesday of next week. UUUC had put down some motions for debate and these would probably be selected by the Business Committee for the business of the plenary session. The motion fell into five parts:
 - (i) A welcome for the acceptance by the British Government of some of the matters outlined in the Report.
 - (ii) Reaffirmation that the Report of the Convention had in fact represented the most widespread agreement in the Convention.
 - (iii) An attack on Secretary of State, Prime Minister, Council of Europe, defence policy etc.
 - (iv) A recommendation that the Government implement the terms of the Convention Report without delay; and
 - (v) A tribute to the Chairman.
3. The Secretary of State asked when the Vanguard motion on a referendum on the question of voluntary coalition would be taken. Chairman said it would be taken on the second day of business as Private Members' Business. However it was open to the Convention to suspend standing orders and dispense with

Private Members' time so that it was not possible to be categorical on this matter.

4. The Secretary of State said he was of a mind to end the Convention at the end of the four week period. This meant closing on Tuesday midnight. However if the Vanguard motion were to be discussed he would not be averse to allowing an extra day for this. The view was expressed that parties other than UUUC were unlikely to participate in the debate on the UUUC motion. On the other hand the SDLP, Alliance and UPNI were likely to involve themselves in the discussion of the Vanguard motion.
5. The Chairman explained the procedure which had been followed for minuting the inter-party talks and the arrangements for verbatim recording when requested by the parties. UUUC were likely to ask for the publication, not only of the proceedings, but of the verbatim record such as it was.
6. The S of S said that the UUUC were in extremely ill-odour at Westminster. He felt he was in a stronger position than some months ago. He would be recommending that the British Government should maintain the system of Direct Rule and would probably be supported in this.
7. The question of intervention was mentioned only casually and in order to be dismissed. The question of a referendum was raised, S of S saying that he had not much faith in the opposition.
8. It was agreed to meet again after the Business Committee meeting on Thursday. In the light of the discussions in the Business Committee and the arrangements made for business the S of S would then decide whether to terminate the Convention on Tuesday or Wednesday.
9. The S of S asked Mr Blackburn what the position was in relation to access of the building by Convention Members. Mr Blackburn said he would enforce whatever directions he received from NIO. S of S explained that the payment of Members would be continued as a form of redundancy payment. The representational status of Members would cease when the Convention dissolved, and he was of a mind to withdraw facilities for use of the building at the same time.
10. The meeting lasted about an hour. It was remarkable in that virtually no reference was made to the question of intervention which had been discussed at official level for some weeks. It also appeared that HMG did not have any policy to put in place of a failure of the Convention. The S of S also displayed a certain anxiety to be rid of the Convention Members and to prevent their using the facilities of the building.