

TSG (6/92)

TALKS STEERING GROUP

Minutes of a meeting held in the VCR on Thursday 21 May at 10.30 am.

Those Present:

London

Mr Thomas
 Mr Bell
 Mr Wood
 Mr Allsop
 Mr Cooke
 Mr Dodds
 Mr D A Hill
 Mr D J R Hill
 Mr Percival
 Ms Lodge
 Mr Stephens
 Mr Smith
 Mr Archer
 Mr Hallett

Belfast

Mr Fell
 Mr Alston
 Mr Watkins
 Mr Cornick
 Mr Maccabe
 Mr Campton
 Miss Pyper

Mr Thomas gave a very brief resume of progress in the Talks and how things stand at present. Essentially, all four parties' proposals for new structures in Northern Ireland had been discussed in plenary, and the Secretary of State had gently drawn the debate to a close yesterday afternoon. There would be a further plenary next Tuesday "to take stock". At a wash-up meeting yesterday afternoon (and after slight signs of movement from John Hume), the Secretary of State made it clear he did not want to alert the Irish to the position at this time. The other three parties (DUP, UUP, Alliance) had all indicated they would welcome "help" in order to refine/make more acceptable their respective papers. With the inclusion of the SDLP, there was a real prospective of business being done, if only we could remove the proposed external Commissioners.

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Mr D J R Hill added that he had drawn up a summary brief for the Secretary of State's leaders meeting on Thursday afternoon. It included a suggested work plan for taking the process forward by means of working up three papers and dropping the SDLP proposals, or working up all four papers, though dropping the externally appointed Commissioners. The second would be the preferred option, as it was important for the SDLP to be engaged.

Strand 2 Issues

George Thompson had duly arrived in London yesterday and a suitable programme of events had been arranged for his visit to London, Dublin and Belfast.

Mr Alston commented that the Secretary of State was hoping that Sir Ninian Stephen would be in the public domain as little as possible, and certainly not until after the had met with the party leaders.

On practicalities, Mr Dodds reported that there may still be some problems with venues. Lancaster House was still not an absolute certainty and further enquiries were being made at the QE2 Conference Centre as a fallback option. The problems for the first two weeks of June involved security, and thereafter there was a clash with another conference which could be moved, but NIO would have to pay displacement costs. As regards Sir Ninian's accommodation in Northern Ireland, Mr Dodds reported that the RUC had now given the okay to both the Culloden and Greyabbey, the final decision now lay with Sir Ninian. The placement of Irish Ministers had also been agreed.

With regard to staff for Sir Ninian, Mr Campton reported that there should be no problem with typists and clerks. However, there were problems with the potential note takers - both with release from parent departments and the quality of the potential candidates mentioned so far.

Strategic Issues/Talks Collapse Scenario/["Beyond the Crunch!"]

Mr Alston briefly detailed the contents of his minute "Political Talks: Strategic Issues". It outlined the Government's continuing strategy of the past 20 years with regards to terrorism, devolution, and improving relations within the community; the direct and indirect contribution of the AIA to the current political situation; and the current position within the talks, particularly the effect of the SDLP structures paper. Essentially, the paper raised the question of what would happen in the longer term in the event of a collapse in the talks.

The main points brought out in discussion were:

- a. The talks would break down if the SDLP (and the Irish?) dug their heels in. But did they fully appreciate the effects of such a breakdown? If they thought they would be in a better, or even just the same, position as when they entered the talks, they could be mistaken.
- b. It was considered that the Unionists had "played the game" and taken risks in the talks so far, whereas the SDLP had not. Feelings towards both camps afterwards may consequently be different.
- c. A collapse in talks could lead to an increase in terrorist activity on both sides.
- d. If it became necessary to subsequently impose a solution, it would prove difficult to get both sides of the community to accept the Government's proposals.
- e. It would be necessary to point up to Ministers the gloomy prospects ahead should the talks collapse and to emphasise that everything possible should be done to prevent such a collapse.

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- f. One possible way forward, beyond a collapse, would be to draw up a White Paper (along the lines of David Hill's minute of 27 February 1992) which could suggest a three stranded solution based on the agreed Common Themes, Principles, and the Structures Sub Committee report. This might suggest that the Government had a clearer idea, following the talks and the progress made there, and could now set out it's ideas for the best solution. This would involve: a new AIA; arrangements made for improved relations between the North and South of Ireland; and, a proposed model for the Government of Northern Ireland.

It was agreed that three papers should be prepared for Ministers for the weekend: Mr Alston would expand his original paper to highlight the need to prevent a breakdown in talks because of the variously gloomy to grim prospects for the future thereafter; Mr D J R Hill would prepare a paper suggesting the "best possible" future should there be a breakdown; and Mr D J R Hill would also prepare, what in effect would be a tactical handling plan, a paper on the various options to avoid a possible breakdown.

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