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From Q J Thomas
AUS(L)
23 January 1990



cc PS/S of S (L&B) - B
PS/Dr Mawhinney (L&B) - B
PS/PUS (L&B) - B
1. Sir K Bloomfield - B
Mr Burns (o/r) - B
Mr Ledlie - B
Mr Miles - B
Mr Blackwell - B
Mr Dodds - B
Mr Kirk - B
Mr Daniell - B
Mr J McConnell - B
Mr Hill - B
HM Ambassador, Dublin - FAX
Mr George, FCO - B

2. Mr Spence + return
3. For 2

PS/Minister of State (L&B) - B

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT: TALKS IN DUBLIN

1. As you know, Mr Burns and I, accompanied by the Ambassador, met Irish officials yesterday for a preliminary exchange on political development, in preparation for a discussion between Ministers at the next IGC. We stressed that the talks were confidential and in particular that neither side in its dealings with the political parties in Northern Ireland should, on the basis of these talks, attribute any particular views to the other Government.

2. In one respect the ground had been prepared for the meeting by the weekend exchange of signals from, respectively, Messrs Nicholson and Allen on the one hand and Mr Haughey on the other. The Taoiseach had made it clear that it had always been possible to negotiate a new Agreement to replace the existing one, provided that this was done by agreement. This was in effect a more forward position on the first Unionist pre-condition than any so far made by British Ministers (as we pointed out in Dublin); though it is consistent with the thrust of the Bangor speech.

3. We had a useful and constructive discussion. (We met Mr Nally, Secretary to the Cabinet, Mr Dorr, Secretary to DFA and Mr Dermot Gallagher Head of the Anglo-Irish Division of the DFA.) Irish interest was fully concentrated on political matters for this

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discussion. There was no discussion of Whiterock, Stalker/Sampson or other preoccupations. Indeed, though the television was switched on over lunch to catch Mr Molyneaux on ITN, it was switched off again at the beginning of an item on Stalker/Sampson. There is every sign that the Irish will reflect constructively on what was said in advance of the next IGC. The door has been opened and the first signs are reasonably encouraging. Irish officials clearly share our perception of many of the sensitivities, and they and their Ministers will be anxious to ensure that no blame for obstructing current signs of progress attaches to them. There is some risk that in further responding to the Nicholson/Allen remarks the Taoiseach may over-state the position. We pointed generally to the danger that current momentum might 'peak too soon' and of the Taoiseach canalizing matters into a particular groove (specifically a Unionist/Dublin dialogue). (In the event the Taoiseach's subsequent statement on Monday afternoon appears helpful and has apparently been welcomed by Unionists, with the important exception of Mr Paisley.)

4. On specifics, we spent a fair amount of time on the three Unionist pre-conditions:

(i) Their demand for a sign that the Agreement could be looked at afresh. It was noted that British Ministers (with the no pre-conditions formulation and other remarks) and the Taoiseach had both in different ways already said enough to overcome this obstacle;

(ii) suspending the operation of the Agreement. We stressed that there was no question of British Ministers agreeing to a suspension of the Agreement of its operation. (Indeed the visit was clearly timely in enabling us to remove any lurking suspicion that British commitment to the Agreement had somehow become diluted.) However, there was some chance that the Unionists' expectations might be scaled down to accept little more than a natural gap in Conference meetings, if this was sensitively handled and presented. We stressed the need for the British and Irish Governments to have a clear common

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understanding of how this might be done; and that there should be a clear terminus ad quem. If anything it should be a gap, but not an open-ended pause in meetings. While this will be for discussion at the next IGC there are reasonable prospects that we and the Irish may be able to reach agreement. We exposed the possibility that, if there were meetings in February, June and July a gap could be initiated at a meeting in March. But we did not attempt to secure agreement to specifics or to discuss the precise forms of words which might be used after the next Conference(s) on these matters.

(iii) Running down the Secretariat. There was a preliminary exchange on this, mentioning the possibility that if political talks were to start the head of the British side of the Secretariat would need to devote much more time to the political aspects of his work. As we feared this - and specifically the Irish side of the Secretariat - may prove to be difficult. The Irish did however canvass the idea that the (joint) Secretariat might be diverted to service a constitutional conference. We noted that this might be a brilliant wheeze, but could also frighten off the Unionists at a stroke. We stressed that the British Government saw the Secretariat as a useful and valuable institution whose work must in reality continue.

5. More generally, the Irish side expressed measured scepticism about the extent of the evidence of political progress in Northern Ireland to justify the Government's making much of a response. In particular there is a worry that neither Paisley nor Molyneaux are fully signed up to the emerging signs of flexibility. The Unionists might seek to secure some apparent concession on the Agreement which they would then pocket triumphantly without offering anything in return. We stressed our alertness to these risks.

6. The Irish showed interest, not unnaturally, in how the talks, if they were initiated, would be handled, and what the Irish role would be. They stressed the importance of our developing a clear

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view on the format of such talks, which could be of crucial importance. In a nutshell, I believe Irish officials well understand the sensitivity of prominent and early Irish participation in talks, but expect the Taoiseach to look towards a conference which he (or perhaps Mr Collins) chairs. (There was reference to the joint British/Irish chairmanship at Sunningdale; while we made the point that this was the culmination of a much longer process.) We stressed that while insensitive handling of Irish involvement could finish the process off, the answer to the first Unionist pre-condition - that the Agreement might in principle be replaced by a better one - must imply direct Irish participation at some stage; and the Irish also have the right under the Agreement to put forward views and proposals on the modalities of achieving devolution.

7. Matters were, I believe, carried to the point where Irish Ministers will be briefed for a constructive and substantive exchange at the next IGC. The Secretary of State will be advised (by Mr Burns in person and by telegram from the Ambassador) that he might respond positively to the Nicholson/Allen remarks, welcoming the Taoiseach's positive comment on them. (Indeed, whether in response to a telegram or otherwise, I have heard the Secretary of State on the radio expressing broadly these views.) It seems doubtful if much more is needed by way of public comment from Ministers in advance of the Secretary of State's return.

8. Mr Miles will wish to note that it was made clear that the Irish would brief the Irish side of the Secretariat but that they might look to him for any necessary clarification.

(SIGNED)

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