

CONFIDENTIAL

RJA/82/90/sh



FROM: R J ALSTON  
US(POL)  
29 May 1990

- cc PS/SofS (L&B) - B
- PS/MofS (L&B) - B
- PS/Dr Mawhinney (L&B) - B
- PS/PUS (L&B) - B
- 1. PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B 2. Pol 2.
- Mr Burns - B
- Mr Ledlie - B
- Mr Thomas - B
- Mr Wood (L&B) - B
- Mr D J R Hill - B
- Mr J McConnell - B
- Mr Blackwell - B
- Mr Daniell - B
- Mr Dodds - B
- Dr Donnelly - B
- Mr George, RID FCO - B
- HM Ambassador, Dublin - via RID

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

DISCUSSION BETWEEN OFFICIALS IN DUBLIN 25 MAY 1990: POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

Present

Mr Burns  
Sir N Fenn  
Mr Q Thomas  
Mr Alston

Mr Dorr (briefly)  
Mr Gallagher  
Mr O'Donovan  
Miss Anderson

Mr Burns said that he had been asked to brief Irish officials on the Secretary of State's recent contacts with Northern Ireland political parties prior to his own visit to see Mr Collins on 28 May. His judgement was that the Unionists wanted to get involved in the process and get something out of it. Dr Paisley had come to see the need for progress some time ago. Mr Molyneaux appeared more confident following the Upper Bann By-Election. They realised they would not get everything they sought. The discussion with the SDLP had been very business-like on the Secretary of State's agenda.

CONFIDENTIAL

They had been impressed almost to the point of incredulity, and had wanted time (two to three weeks) to consider what they had heard. Like the Unionists they had refused to discuss details with the Press.

2. Mr Dorr said that this amounted almost to a miracle. How had it come about? Mr Burns said that it was based on what Ministers had hoped on 19/20 April which now seemed to be deliverable, not just an act of faith. His brief was to be as full as possible. He went on to summarise the position of the Preconditions. Number 1 was now satisfied with no further action needed by either Government. On the second the Unionists had abandoned suspension of the Conference and would now settle for an interval (on which he handed over a possible form of words). On the third the Unionists had at first sought to conclude that no Conference meetings would mean no Secretariat activity and that it could then close. The Secretary of State had explained its other roles as a residence, a communications channel, and a focus for discussion of a range of other issues. They had returned on 22 May in the mood of wanting to secure an outcome and thus willing to say that it would be enough if the Conference became inactive. The Secretary of State had said that this was inappropriate and had offered language relating to "not servicing Conference meetings". After some discussion a form of words had been agreed (this he handed over). It was a fig leaf and the Unionists knew it. The Secretary of State had told the SDLP that there would be no suspension, no suspension of Maryfield, no reduction of staff and no diminution in the level of activity.

3. Mr Gallagher asked where the formula would be used. Mr Burns said this had not yet been addressed, but probably not in a Communique.

4. On the format of talks Mr Burns outlined the steps envisaged following the discussions with the Unionists. Talks now appeared to be practicable and achievable. He emphasised that the Unionists

CONFIDENTIAL

accepted that when invited by the Secretary of State to attend a plenary they would come, making no more preconditions. It was hard to perceive how the process would develop after the initial plenary. The focus was on the issues which the parties wanted to discuss, ie the three relationships as defined by the SDLP and accepted by the Unionists who were unequivocal that the process would expand to include North/South talks. They did not however see how they could come to meet Irish Ministers at the first meeting in the series. They conceded that the three elements must be tackled simultaneously and not sequentially but believe that they must see prospect of progress on the internal talks before proceeding. They would accept the Secretary of State's judgement when the moment had come to talk to the Irish and would accept his invitation without extra preconditions. This would be based on "some substantial progress". He handed over a form of words. This recognised the need to be clear from the outset that the process would include all the elements. There was a firm commitment by the Unionists to talks, and agenda with triple relationships, a process involving meetings with Irish Ministers before agreement could be reached and reference to this from the outset.

5. On Secretariat involvement Mr Burns summarised the position as being that the Heads of Secretariat would not be involved in internal talks (as agreed on 19 April). The Unionists acknowledged the right of the two Governments to choose their own advisers for the other two strands. The Secretary of State had emphasised that the British Head was his expert and would be involved. Their presence would be accepted therefore but it was important that they should not be labelled. The Unionists also realised that there would be liaison arrangements and that neither Head of Secretariat would be detached to other duties. The SDLP had had some difficulty with this and thought that the Unionists could only have accepted something more far reaching. There seemed however to be a gradual acceptance that this was not all a zero sum game. Summing up he

CONFIDENTIAL

hoped that what we now had was a platform which both parties would accept. He summarised the next steps as a meeting between the Secretary of State and Mr Collins, a meeting between the Secretary of State and the Alliance, a further meeting with the SDLP, and the beginning of bilaterals between officials and the Northern Ireland parties. He noted that the next Conference would not be the beginning of the gap. In his personal view this would probably begin in September.

6. Mr Gallagher stressed that the Agreement of 19 April was finally balanced and difficult to change. This was the bedrock. Some slippage was apparent but how significant must be thought through. He was worried about the Unionist formulation. Both the timing and format of North/South talks had changed. The SDLP were likely to have preconditions of their own (Mr Burns noted that John Hume now accepted that the concept of "prior" North/South talks was overtaken). On the Secretariat there was potential for public controversy about what was meant. He was worried about what was said about the liaison group. What mechanism would there be for Irish input into the internal talks. Mr Burns said that he assumed the input to all three elements would be brought about by liaison between the two Heads of the Secretariat which would also be the means for reporting where we stood. This was necessary but would not be advertised. Mr Gallagher asked whether this would reflect partial redeployment or an organic link between the Secretariat and the talks. Mr Burns stressed that it would be the latter. Miss Anderson asked whether it would be publicly acknowledged. Mr Burns said the precise wording had not been developed. We could say that liaison would be maintained but should not claim that there was to be a formal Liaison Group for the Talks.

7. Mr Burns continued that he recognised that there was slippage, more on timing than on format. The Secretary of State saw himself as a facilitator rather than a leader. It was difficult to disagree

CONFIDENTIAL

with the Unionists that the Northern Ireland political parties at present had no specific mandate on which to negotiate with the Government of the Republic. They would be an administration in waiting only once the internal talks concluded. Mr Gallagher stressed that the internal talks could not go very far before North/South talks began. Mr Burns said both he and the Secretary of State agreed. Mr Gallagher said he thought they would need to be brought into line. Mr Burns said that the Secretary believed he had taken the Unionists to their bottom line. If we pushed them further the whole process could be at risk. Mr Gallagher said that it might be better to be at risk now than later. He thought that a new climate was emerging. The IRA were yesterday's men and there was a hemorrhage of support for them in the Border counties. A breakdown in a publicly backed Northern Ireland process could give them encouragement. Mr Burns said that Dr Paisley was very much of the same mind and the Secretary of State was careful to build in a point at each stage at which process could stop. He was probing the Unionist level of sincerity. They had said they would come when asked but he would be careful not to ask them until he was ready.

8. Mr O'Donovan asked whether the Unionist paper had been given to the SDLP. Mr Burns said that it had not though the Secretary of State had drawn on the concept in the discussion. Mr O'Donovan asked when the East/West talks would begin. Mr Burns said this was a matter for the Governments. Mr Gallagher, stressing that the second Conference must take place on the due date asked whether discussions could continue after that. Mr Burns said that the first point was accepted. What would then follow had not been discussed. He would like to put down a marker on the length of the gap. Two months should not be regarded as immutable. In the normal way of things there might well be slippage if we were talking about a gap ending towards Christmas time. We should not pre-empt this sort of flexibility. Mr Gallagher commented that more than two months stretched credibility. There was a reference to regular meetings in the review document.

CONFIDENTIAL

9. Miss Anderson asked whether there was a mechanism for further discussion with the Unionists. Mr Burns explained that the Secretary of State believed he had taken the Unionists to their bottom line and had no further plans to meet them himself until the gap began. He hoped he had an arrangement which could be made to work. It seemed to him that, given that the 19 April Agreement had not been based on consultation with the Unionists, it was remarkable that so much had proved deliverable. The Unionists had said four years ago that they would not talk to either Governments. They had laid out three strong preconditions which they had subsequently greatly watered down. They had a problem in reconciling their present and their past postures, but they were doing so. They had not made much of the McGimpsey Judgement. Peter Robinson had described the process as "suing for peace". The SDLP should not be triumphalist about this. In reply to a comment by Mr Gallagher Mr Burns said that it was not inevitable that they should have taken this path. He understood the earlier Irish position but believed there was now new evidence of a changed view amongst the Unionists, looking to the aftermath rather than to defiance of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. But if we pushed them into a corner it was not inconceivable they would go back to their position of "no surrender".

10. HM Ambassador commented that the opportunity for Agreement between the two major traditions in Northern Ireland was a major Irish objective. We should asked ourselves if it could be fulfilled in other ways. It did now seem to be achievable by the route mapped out by the Secretary of State. Mr Gallagher commented that it had been the wisdom of 19 April but it needed to be done in a certain way. Mr O'Donovan commented that the North/South element might never take place. Mr Burns said he respected and understood the point. Ministers must talk together, focussing on what was achievable.

11. Mr Gallagher asked what pressure had been put on the Unionists

CONFIDENTIAL

on the question of proceeding in unison. Mr Burns said that the Secretary of State had pressed them on the idea of a more or less simultaneous but formal start. The Unionists had rejected this. Mr Thomas added that, if the internal talks got under way but the Unionists then refused to join the North/South talks they would have thrown away not only any gains in those talks but any chances of a new Agreement. In reply to a question from Mr O'Donovan Mr Burns said that there had not been a specific discussion with the Unionists of the agenda for the North/South talks but they would clearly cover the nature of change to the Anglo-Irish Agreement; Article 2 and 3 could only be discussed direct with the Irish Government; the nature of the North/South relationship would also have to be explored. The Unionists recognised the inter-dependence of the two as did the SDLP.

12. Mr Gallagher said that there had to be trust and confidence. The 19 April Agreement had set out a way to achieve this. Mr Burns replied that this was precisely what the Secretary of State was doing and this was being reciprocated in Northern Ireland. Everyone agreed that the problems were not capable of solution within the six counties alone. A stable future needed an understanding with Dublin and personal relationships. The Secretary of State's softly softly approach was designed to draw the Unionists gradually into taking the step with talks with Dublin. It was a matter of judgement precisely when that would happen. Face to face talks were not an optional extra but participants must be willing.

13. Mr Gallagher commented that he found the Unionist statement depressing and going beyond the grey areas of the 19 April Agreement. Mr Burns stressed that he believed a meeting would in the end take place but to try to commit them sooner might cause the elastic to break.

CONFIDENTIAL

14. Mr O'Donovan noted that there might be a need for a fairly early Question and Answer brief to deal with public political questions.

[signed)

R J ALSTON

Ext 2507

12508/sh