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Re 2.18.91

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24 DEC 1991

MR/27274

FROM: R J ALSTON
US(POL)
23 December 1991

MR THOMAS(L&B) o.r.

cc PS/Secretary of State(L&B)
PS/Minister of State(L&B)
PS/PUS(L&B)
~~PS/Mr Feal~~
Mr Bell
Mr D J R Hill
Mr Cooke
Mr McNeill
Mr Dodds
Mr Archer
HMA Dublin
Mr Alston(B)

30/11

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BRIEFING FOR THE IRISH SIDE ON THE SECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETINGS WITH THE PARTY LEADERS ON 19 DECEMBER 1991

Mr O'Donovan travelled to London to enable you to de-brief him on these meetings on the morning of 20 December. The Secretary of State had authorised you to give a fairly candid briefing in the light of the constructive discussion at the Conference on 18 December. You took Mr O'Donovan through the sequence of meetings.

2. On the 3pm meeting with the SDLP you said that the Secretary of State had run through the Unionist position on the various elements of the 26 March Statement. They were ready for a multilateral discussion on the groundrules for further talks. The Secretary of State then outlined the ideas on the gap developed at the IGC. He emphasised that the Unionists had now reverted to wishing Strand 3 to fall within the gap. He had finally outlined Unionists ideas on Strand 1 and Strand 2 venues and timescales. Mr Hume had expressed difficulties about reconciling this with private Unionist positions and had asked

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whether it was available in writing. The Secretary of State had said that a statement on 26 March lines was envisaged. Mr Hume had asked whether Strand 2 was guaranteed to begin prior to an election. The Secretary of State had said that this was his understanding. He could however give no guarantee but, if an election (save a very early one) came about without talks getting to Strand 2 he would have failed. Mr Hume said that there were a number of areas of potential problems for the SDLP. They would reflect on these and return.

3. On the 4.15pm meeting with the Unionists the Secretary of State had emphasised the search for a mutually acceptable formula and a hope that the chore of this might be identified before Christmas. He had referred to the discussion of the gap at the IGC but had not handed over a text. Dr Paisley had said that he had great problems with the idea of two IGCs, especially one following an election. The Secretary of State had emphasised the possible need for a new Secretary of State to consult the Irish Government as well as the potential value of discussion of extending the gap. At this stage the Unionist leaders had also interpolated irritation about reports that Mr Collins was making "overtures" to them. The Unionists had said that they say the argument for the two governments to meet but questioned why both needed to be Conferences. You said that you felt they were probably neutral as to which of the two might be called a Conference. You could see two possible ways forward; one meeting might not be discussed as a Conference; although might be a "double header". For example there might be a "terse" meeting before an election and an adjournment to resume discussion after an election. You were pretty sure that the Unionists would buy the first of these solutions, the other was possible. If the Irish side could accept either, the Secretary of State would seek to sell them.

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4. The discussion had then moved to arrangements for Strand 2. Despite some resistance the Secretary of State had been determined to carry this forward on the basis that it was essential to have a common understanding in advance. Dr Paisley continued to have significant problems about sending in Stephen as the co-Chairman. Mr Molyneaux had talked of the need for consultation, which you interpreted as a helpful intervention to cover a possible retreat for Dr Paisley. The Secretary of State had taken a firm line saying that if Dr Paisley had stuck to his position the process would probably be dead until after the election. Dr Paisley had seemed uneasy at this point and asked about the SDLP position.

5. On the 5.30pm meeting with the SDLP John Hume had announced that they had five points of concern about what had been put to them. Firstly they retained a strong preference for delegations of 5+5. Second, on the venue for Strand 1 they retained a "strong preference" for Stormont Castle vis-a-vis London. On the sequence of meetings for Strand 2 they expressed a preference for London/Dublin/Belfast. You suggested that this might have been a mis-recollection of the agreement in the summer. Fourth they expressed doubts that the gap might be too long if the election came late. They had not pressed this point when the Secretary of State had commented that it had seemed acceptable to the Irish Government. Lastly they did not want to say anything which would imply a view on their part about a change of administration. They nonetheless recognised that progress was being made and had said that they would want to consult both their own party and Dublin and to return after Christmas. The Secretary of State had pressed them as to when this would be. Mr Hume had got slightly irritated about this, but the Secretary of State pointed out that there was quite a lot to do to go over principles, details and at text if a

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process was to be launched after a Conference on 22 January. He had described the two Unionist problems (two IGCs and the independent chairmanship). Mr Hume had commented that the differences were not that great. Mr Mallon had emphasised the need to involve the full delegation (on which Mr O'Donovan had commented that he accepted that this was probably important for the health of the SDLP). The Secretary of State had however indicated that there was some risk that this would be seen as a ploy by the SDLP in relation to the debate on the venue. He had suggested a meeting of all four party leaders on 7 January. The SDLP had not been signed up to this but had not dissented from it.

6. You said that at this stage the Secretary of State had decided to abandon the idea of a plenary meeting on 19 December to avoid the risk that people would get locked into incompatible positions. The Secretary of State had next seen Dr Alderdice at about 7.15pm and outlined the Unionist problems and the possible solutions to them. He had described the position about the independent chairmanship as "unhappiness of a reasonably determined kind". He had also summarised the five SDLP points. Dr Alderdice had expressed himself as not surprised but as disappointed especially about Sir Ninian Stephen.

7. Dr Paisley had returned at about 8.10pm, speaking on Mr Molyneaux's behalf as well as his own. He said that the Unionists would be happy with a meeting on 7 January. The Secretary of State had summarised the five SDLP problems, emphasising the delegation size seemed the most significant. Dr Paisley had said that he and Mr Molyneaux would like to see the Secretary of State on the 6th, (you interpolated that the Secretary of State had regarded this as an encouraging development). Dr Paisley had gone on to say that if the SDLP suggested delegations of 10 then the talks should revert to

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Parliament Buildings. He wanted to speak further to Mr Molyneaux and Mr Hume about this, perhaps in a small meeting at Westminster. The Secretary of State had enquired whether this would involve him. Dr Paisley had indicated, but slightly less than wholeheartedly that it would.

8. Commenting on the sequence of meetings you said that the Secretary of State's judgement had been that Dr Paisley was someone who wanted to do a deal, and that Mr Molyneaux was also seeking a way forward. There seemed to a common view of the need for momentum. There were problems with the idea that the party leaders could meet before 7 January. Mr O'Donovan commented that he understood that Mr Hume was in Dublin that day. The ideal sequence would be a meeting between party leaders and then an Anglo-Irish contact before the 7th. However the Secretary of State was worried about locking ourselves into a pre-determined sequence of meetings in case this led to delay.

9. Looking at the SDLP comments, he reiterated that those on Strand 2 venue might be based on a misunderstanding. (Mr O'Donovan commented to me subsequently that he did not think that we should assume this). The doubts about pre-election gap might be assuaged by knowledge of the Irish view. Any read-out on the SDLP reaction to the formula which had emerged from the IGC would be welcomed before 6 January. Mr O'Donovan commented that, in addition to the size of delegation, he regarded the language which would reflect a possible change of administration as the other important issue.

10. Mr O'Donovan enquired whether Dr Paisley was fully signed up to the 26 March solutions to the three Unionist pre-conditions. He wondered whether there would be a need for further discussion as to what that language meant. He referred to a radio

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interview in which Dr Paisley had spoken of "withdrawal" from Maryfield. You said that fairly forcefully that you thought that any discussion on these lines would be a bad thing. Mr O'Donovan said that he thought the reasons why Dr Paisley felt he had to say things which would reassure his own supporters but they could have an undesirable impact on nationalists. You said that you saw the point, but continued to think that a message to encourage him to refrain from making such statements would be preferable to getting more detailed discussion. Mr O'Donovan said that he anticipated that Dublin would want to return to that issue though he accepted that the avoidance of unhelpful comment was another reason for trying to make progress swiftly.

11. In concluding the meeting you reiterated that the Secretary of State had produced no text with any of the parties and that he had found the IGC very constructive and helpful.

SECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETING WITH DR ALDERDICE: 15 DECEMBER 1971

The Secretary of State met Dr Alderdice at 7.15 pm in the large Ministerial Conference Room in the House. The Minister of State, MRS, Mr Thomas, you and I were also present.

2. The Secretary of State thanked Dr Alderdice for coming to London and brought him up to date with what had happened since he [DICTATED BY MR ALSTON(L) & SIGNED IN HIS ABSENCE: Marie Rebello]

demonstrated a degree of diplomatic nervousness about the Unionist proposition that if there were to be a change of Government then "all bets were off" so far as continuing talks in relation was concerned. To agree to such a proposal interpreted as the Irish Government "taking sides". If a Conservative Government were to be re-elected, the Irish Government had made the suggestion that a second IGC should be held immediately after the election. A decision would be taken at this IGC whether a longer period should be allowed for the further talks, judged in the light of the progress of the talks thus far. Overall, the approach of the Irish Government had been energetic and purposive. There had been no "kicking the ball into the long grass".

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