



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH  
BÉAL FEIRSTE

Mr. Gullin  
S.A.  
ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT  
BELFAST

24

**Confidential**

*John*  
*Note 'x' at page 5 in particular.*  
*Janey 12/10*

11 October 1995

Mr Sean O hUiginn  
Second Secretary  
Anglo Irish Division  
Dept of Foreign Affairs

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*Councillors A1.*

Dear Second Secretary

**Conversation with Sir John Chilcot**

I called yesterday on Sir John Chilcot, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Northern Ireland Office. Martin Williams was also present.

Having welcomed me to my new assignment and discussed a number of organisational matters relating to the Secretariat, Chilcot turned to the prospects for a resolution of the current impasse in the peace process.

The following are some points of interest which arose in the course of this discussion.

**The twin-track approach**

- Chilcot returned last week from a ten-day visit to Australia and New Zealand with the Secretary of State. Having briefed himself on developments in the interim, he was more encouraged than he had been prior to his departure about the degree of Sinn Fein commitment to the twin-track approach.
- The reports he had seen suggested that Sinn Fein now saw some potential in this approach and were prepared to work constructively in that direction. He also sensed a greater readiness on Sinn Fein's part to recognise that talks could not proceed without the Unionists and that they themselves had a part to play in helping to get the latter to the table.



Government in this area, he wondered whether private-sector US sponsorship (he mentioned Chuck Feeney and Bill Flynn as possibilities) might pay for research assistance and other back-up.

### The Assembly/Convention idea

- Referring to the Trimble proposal for an Assembly, Chilcot recognised that the SDLP and Sinn Fein were very unlikely to agree to an approach of this kind which would involve detaching, and lending undue prominence to, the internal strand of all-party talks. If a talks process were to open with elections to an Assembly, furthermore, participants would be engaging on the basis of election manifesto commitments and this would deny the process the flexibility needed to guide it towards a successful outcome.
- I observed that nationalists envisaged a process which would culminate in elections - a logical sequence - whereas Unionists seemed to favour the reverse procedure. Chilcot agreed that the Unionist approach involved "putting the cart before the horse".
- In principle, he saw attractions in a mandated body of some kind - closer to Paisley's Convention idea than to the Trimble proposal - which would discuss matters ranging across all three strands, including constitutional questions, in preparation for eventual all-party talks. He envisaged that Strands Two and Three would be handled in the form of the Convention being empowered to address, and to negotiate with, the two Governments on these issues.
- He accepted, however, that such a structure would introduce a considerable imbalance to the treatment of the three-stranded agenda and could compromise the intergovernmental management of the process. He also recognised that Sinn Fein were challenging the need for a renewal of mandates; care would have to be taken not to call into question the democratic legitimacy of existing mandates. He also noted the difficulty arising from Sinn Fein's traditional abstentionism in relation to "legislatures". He presumed, however, that this constraint would not apply in relation to a Convention (which would have no legislative powers).
- Chilcot's main point on the Assembly/Convention proposal was that, with all its attendant risks and complexities (which he readily recognised), it would not be easy to implement this proposal, or to steer it towards any satisfactory outcome, within the period of time available to the British Government between now and the next election.
- The creation of elaborate machinery of this kind would be a laborious and time-consuming exercise and would be seriously contemplated by Ministers only if they judged that the effort would produce real dividends, i.e., a significant measure of political agreement among the participants, in advance of the next election.

- What they would not wish to do would be to go to the trouble of organising elections to such a body, launching its discussions and having its work interrupted or jeopardised by a rapidly approaching general election. It was clear that, as the election approached, the NI parties would decide that it was no longer worth their while dealing with the present British Government.
- As to the timing of the election, Chilcot was aware of speculation that the Prime Minister wished to "go to the wire" (i.e. delay the election until March/April 1997). He noted, however, that Brian Mawhinney had been careful to keep all options open on election timing at this week's Conservative Party Conference. His own guess was that, with the Government's majority shrinking rapidly, the Prime Minister might decide to bring the election forward somewhat. One possibility was that, supported by a tax-cutting budget in about a year's time, he would opt for a date either towards the end of 1996 or at the beginning of 1997.
- In a sense, Chilcot suggested, there was too much time available for the Assembly proposal to be implemented. The momentum towards talks of some description was quickening perceptibly, there was a mood around that "something must happen" and Ministers would wish to be seen to be responding to this over the coming months. Chilcot was reminded in many ways of the atmosphere in 1990-91 in the run-up to the agreement of terms for the last round of talks.
- In another sense, however, (and, for Chilcot, this was the more critical consideration), time was running out for the Government. He considered it, on balance, unlikely that Ministers would take serious steps to implement an Assembly/Convention proposal. Their more likely posture would be to welcome it and to encourage discussion of it both now and within the political track of the twin-track scheme.
- In overall terms, while expecting the twin-track scheme to go ahead and, "with luck", substantive all-party talks to commence in due course, Chilcot did not envisage any substantial progress being made towards a political accommodation within the lifetime of the present British Government.

#### Consultation between the two Governments

- Chilcot felt that, after the turbulence caused by the postponement of the summit, relations between the two Governments were back on "an even keel" and our unity of purpose was more clearly in evidence.
- He looked forward to continued intensive consultation between the two Governments on the twin-track approach and all other aspects of the peace process. He noted that, in addition to the other channels of contact, the Liaison Group had a valuable role to play in this regard.

East/West Initiative

Chilcot expressed marked concern about efforts on the British side to bring constitutional matters within the scope of the East/West initiative taken recently by the two Heads of Government.

- Reflecting a standard NIO anxiety, he emphasised the need for a clear distinction to be maintained between Strand Three of future all-party talks (which would embrace constitutional matters, and in which the NIO has "a very deep involvement") and the wider East/West relationship between Ireland and the UK (in which "we are interested but not closely involved").
- I mentioned a range of possibilities which might arise in the economic sphere and to which thought was being given on the Irish side. Chilcot (who is originally from the Home Office) added the possibility of initiatives in the criminal justice area.

Michael Ancram

- Finally, Chilcot was unusually effusive about Michael Ancram, emphasising the latter's political abilities and his key role within the British system as the interlocutor with both Sinn Fein and the Unionists.
- He described Ancram as "a politician's politician" who was more interested in "the business of politics" than in the attainment of any particular office. However, had it not been for his electoral difficulties in Scotland, Ancram would have been made Secretary of State for Scotland some time ago.
- As to his future prospects, Chilcot said that the Minister, who would certainly become a full Cabinet Minister if the Conservatives were re-elected, wished to remain on in the House of Commons during the next Parliament and would not be claiming his family title. However, he was believed to be under strong family pressure in the opposite direction (his father is at an advanced age). Chilcot did not exclude the possibility that, anticipating a prolonged period in office for a future Labour Government, Ancram would decide to throw in the towel altogether at the next general election.

Yours sincerely

*David Donoghue*

David Donoghue  
Joint Secretary