



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/50/125

Creator(s): Department of Foreign Affairs

Accession Conditions: Open

Copyright: National Archives, Ireland. May only be reproduced with the written permission of the Director of the National Archives.

Confidential

body file

P.S.T. P.S.S. S/S O'Huiginn,
Counsellors A.I. Section,
Messrs Teahon, Donlon,
Murray & Dalton
Ambassadors London &
Washington, Joint Secretary
PSM, Minister for Social Welfare
PSM, Minister for Justice

**Lunch discussions between Irish and British Ministers
Castle Buildings, Belfast, 15 January 1996**

Summary Report

The lunch began at 1.15 pm and lasted about 45 minutes. The following were present:

Irish Side: Tánaiste, Minister for Social Welfare, Minister for Justice,
Seán Ó hUiginn, Val O'Donnell, David Donoghue, Pat Nolan,
David Cooney

British Side: Secretary of State, Sir John Wheeler, Michael Ancram,
Stephen Leach, David Watkins, David Hill, Martin Howard

"News from the Road"

Ministers exchanged reports of their latest contacts. The Secretary of State reported that he had responded to pressure from the PUP and the UDP to take a hard line with Sinn Féin on the DAAD killings by asking them if they wanted him to break off contacts with Sinn Féin. They had replied in the negative.

Comparing notes on the recent bilateral meetings between the two Governments and the Workers Party, the Tánaiste indicated that the Workers Party had appeared more open to the possibility of meeting Sinn Féin at their meeting with the Irish Government last Friday than when they met the British Government earlier in the week.

The Secretary of State reported on the Prime Minister's meeting with the International Body on 11 January, at which the Prime Minister had expressed serious concern at the DAAD killings. Holkeri had asked whether the British Government considered Sinn Féin's written submission to have been helpful. According to the Secretary of State, Major had given a "modest yes", arguing that, while what Sinn Féin had said on modalities represented progress, its true value would depend on the context of decommissioning. To this end, the Prime Minister had noted that Sinn Féin was maintaining its position that decommissioning could only take place as part of an ultimate settlement.

Ancram reported that, earlier that morning, he and Wheeler had met the Body to discuss mainly 'practical matters'. They had not tabled a written submission.

How to handle the report of the Mitchell Body

Ministers agreed that the two Governments should publish the report of the International Body within 24 hours, or thereabouts, of its receipt.

The Secretary of State suggested that, while it would be sensible for the Governments to seek early warning on the content of the report and to consult in advance of publication, the risk of selective leaks on either side meant that once the Body had handed over its report the Governments should proceed to publication, either on the same day or the following morning. Based on indications received by both sides that the report would not be unduly long or complicated, it was agreed that this ought to be technically feasible.

Ministers agreed that officials should seek to agree an interim response by the two Governments which could be issued on publication. According to the Secretary of State, such a response might thank the Body for its report; undertake to consider the recommendations of the report on its merits; indicate an intention to consult the parties; appeal for no knee-jerk reactions; and confirm the intention to hold a Summit in mid-February to review both tracks of the twin track process.

The Minister for Social Welfare expressed the need for care to ensure that, pending a substantive response, the two Governments did not lose control of the situation as others clamoured to give their reactions to the report. Wheeler pointed to the difficulties which might arise if the report were published on Friday, with the media seeking to invent a response over the weekend.

Ministers agreed that the publication of the report would preferably be coordinated with a press conference at which the members of the International Body would announce their recommendations. Ancram said that he had gathered that the Body would wish to hold such a press conference in Belfast.

Preparation for the meeting with the SDLP

The Secretary of State suggested that the two Governments should use the meeting to:

- stress the importance which they attach to holding of today's meeting and to the development of the political track;
- sound out John Hume's views on how he sees the future of the process;
- emphasise that the Governments hold entirely to the 3 strand concept and that they have no pre-conceived preference for a political solution;
- address nationalist fears by stressing that a possible role for elections did not signal a desire to see a desire for return to Stormont, or for an internal solution;
- establish Hume's view on the concept of an election - a concept described by the Secretary of State as 'being in the ascendancy'.

The Secretary of State said that, while he had not heard Hume's criticism of the assembly idea earlier in the day, he himself had made it clear in Dungannon that morning that an assembly was not the only means by which the principle of elections might be fulfilled.

The Tánaiste agreed that the Governments should seek to tease out the SDLP's perception of the situation. He suggested that they also be asked about developments in their bilateral meetings with the UUP and for their views on future unionist involvement in the process.

As regards press arrangements, Ministers agreed that they would propose to the SDLP that a short press statement be issued. The British side said that they would not be making any separate statement after the meeting as it was not their practice to be "door-stepped" following twin-track meetings in Belfast. The Tánaiste indicated that he intended to take a small number of questions on his departure.

A role for elections

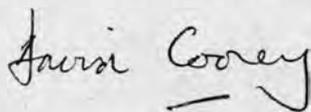
Ministers had a brief discussion on a possible role for elections in all-party negotiations. The Irish side expressed their concern about the possible divisive nature of elections. The Tánaiste pointed to the possibility that Paisley would take a hard line approach in an election which would serve to minimise the opportunity for compromise. The Minister for Justice expressed the fear that elections would force people to take sides on a sectarian basis.

The Secretary of State asked whether elections would really exacerbate what was already there, or whether they would simply give a democratic verdict on the post-ceasefire situation. He pointed out that Paisley had been proposing an election for some time and wondered if, perhaps, Trimble wanted elections to give him the cover to talk to Sinn Féin. He observed that, "for all his bravado", Trimble was "curiously uncertain". Ancram argued that it would be very difficult for Paisley to participate in elections to all-party talks and to subsequently boycott the talks.

The Tánaiste pointed out the difficulty of squaring a proposal for elections with the firm intention of the two Governments to launch all-party negotiations by end-February. The Minister for Social Welfare also stressed the importance of meeting the end-February deadline. The Secretary of State accepted that there was a difficulty in reconciling elections with the Governments' stated timetable, but argued that he wanted to avoid a situation whereby, if the current impasse continued, there was "nowhere to turn". He pointed out the idea of elections was "only in play" because it had been put forward as a way around Washington 3 and would allow those nationalists who were successful in elections to converse with unionists.

Timing of meeting with Sinn Féin

Ó hUiginn reported that, due to diary problems, Sinn Féin had sought to bring Wednesday's trilateral meeting forward from 3.30 pm to 2 pm. Ministers confirmed their intention to meet for a working lunch on Wednesday to prepare for the meeting with Sinn Féin. Since the earliest the Tánaiste could arrive in Belfast would be 1.45-2 pm, the most that the meeting with Sinn Féin could be advanced would be by half an hour.



David Cooney

Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

16 January 1996