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3 July 1997

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

Taisiarnach

Dear Second Secretary

There are significant pointers here - but re Article 2 and 3, Chilcot, who may have been one of the principal proponents of early action by us, ahead of a comprehensive settlement, in ref to retire soon.

Conversation with John Chilcot (2)

We reported previously on points made by Sir John Chilcot about the political talks and the Drumcree issue when he came to dinner in the Secretariat last Monday.

The following are some points of interest which arose on other subjects.

The new British Government's approach

- Chilcot emphasised the urgency which Prime Minister Blair wishes to inject into the search for a political settlement. He and his Ministers are giving the Northern Ireland problem unprecedented priority.
- The last time a Prime Minister devoted so much time to Northern Ireland was in 1985 when Margaret Thatcher immersed herself in the negotiation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Despite his keen interest in the problem, John Major never reached quite the level of concentrated effort which Tony Blair is currently displaying. Peter

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Mandelson recently identified the top two priorities for his master as Northern Ireland and (unsurprisingly, given Mandelson's own mandate in this area) the Millennium projects.

Blair regards Northern Ireland as "an issue to be cracked in the first Parliament". By this Chilcot meant that he wants to make a huge push for political progress over the next year or so. He and his Labour colleagues have a sense of historic destiny (aided, of course, by their majority of historic proportions) and consider that they have a duty to give the problem top priority.

This does not mean, Chilcot assured me, that the Prime Minister will lose interest or commitment if, after a year or so, he has nothing to show for his efforts. While it is true that New Labour are unused to failure, there will simply be a pragmatic acceptance that, if one route has failed to yield results, another will have to be tried out.

Chilcot suggested that, if, by the autumn of this year, it has not proved possible to make progress with the current talks process, the Prime Minister will be in the market for alternative approaches. Failure will lead to an intensification, rather than a reduction, of effort.

Chilcot also distinguished between the reactions of Blair and his immediate predecessor to IRA atrocities. While John Major was more prone to feelings of personal betrayal in such circumstances, Blair has reacted with a longer-term "systemic" anger to the Lurgan murders and, far from being disheartened, is determined to persevere with his efforts. Chilcot believed that he would not be put off his stride by setbacks of this kind but would have greater staying power than Major.

"Plan B"

We discussed what alternative approaches the British Government might have in mind in the event of the present process failing. I noted occasional media speculation about a "Plan B" involving, on the one hand, a revamped Anglo-Irish relationship and, on the other, strengthened local government powers.

- Chilcot sought to play down such speculation. The revamped Anglo-Irish relationship, he suggested, reflected expectations that political progress would automatically involve a strengthening of cooperation between the two Governments.
- As for local government, he emphasised the general desire on the part of the new British Government to reconstruct a role for the Councils in England and Wales and to "de-quango" the UK generally. They are strong believers in local democracy and this carries over into their attitude towards Northern Ireland. However, there is no question of the powers of the NI Councils being expanded outside the context of a political settlement. The most which might be contemplated would be an informal development of their role in encouraging local economic initiative.
- In this respect, Chilcot obliquely apologised for recent remarks by Lord Dubs, who appeared to be launching a political initiative in this area. Bringing the matter up himself, he referred rather sharply to Lord Dubs' political innocence and lack of Ministerial experience prior to two months ago.

Strand Three

- We had a long debate, initiated by Chilcot, on the role which Strand Three deliberations might play in seeking ways of making political progress.
- I noted the suitability of the Strand Three format for the development of a set of proposals, not just within that strand but across the talks as a whole, which the two Governments might present to the parties for discussion in the event of the current collective process failing (or which, indeed, could ultimately be presented to the electorate North and South).
- Chilcot reacted with predictable nervousness to any suggestion of the parties being bypassed. Any proposal put to the electorate, he insisted, would have to be mediated through the parties. The Labour Government, and Tony Blair in particular, pride themselves on a stronger attachment to democratic principles than their predecessors and could not contemplate any route to a settlement other than through the NI parties.

- It quickly emerged that Chilcot's primary interest in discussing Strand Three was to argue a case for movement on our part in relation to Articles 2 and 3 based on the new British Government's commitment to radical constitutional reform and the changing relationships within the British Isles which this will inevitably produce. He held that, in a situation in which old constitutional certainties are being eroded and the principle of consent will henceforth determine whether or not Scotland (and possibly Wales) remain within the Union, our continued hesitations about formally enshrining the consent principle in the Irish Constitution will strike many as unreasonable and anachronistic.
- We made the obvious points in response to this line of argument - our clear statement of intent in the Framework Document, the political context which is essential for a successful referendum on this subject, etc. We also challenged the fundamental assumption that a restructuring of relationships within the UK would in some way alter the view taken by Irish nationalists of how relationships within Ireland should be ordered.
- In discussion, Chilcot advanced the proposition that devolution would lead over time to a discrediting of the concept of two sovereign Governments holding monopolistic sway in the British Isles. He suggested that, if the various regions were to develop cross-connections and increase cooperation with each other, this might provide the Unionists with cover for a more relaxed North/South relationship. Central to this, however, would be a shift in the Irish Government's position whereby movement on Articles 2 and 3 would ~~not~~ be possible in advance of a comprehensive settlement.
- In subsequent discussion, he modified his thinking, suggesting that there might be a case for a more forward position to be taken on this subject at the point where new Assemblies were coming into existence in Scotland and Wales and at the same time progress was being made rapidly towards a NI settlement.
- As for the Prime Minister's recent reference to Articles 2 and 3 in his Belfast speech, Chilcot justified this by noting that Blair did not negotiate the Framework Document and, in any event, that the latter was "not a blueprint".

The "openness and transparency" agenda

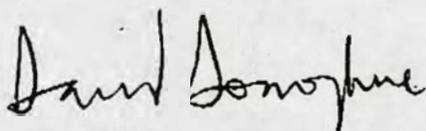
- In conclusion, we discussed the Secretary of State's emphasis on the need for greater "openness and transparency" in the workings of the Anglo-Irish Agreement (an issue on which Chilcot and I have had exchanges in the past arising from PQS by Robert McCartney and others).

- Chilcot distinguished between "openness" and "transparency". The former, in his view, is not feasible in relation to the Conference or Secretariat; the two Governments must be free to reach their decisions in private. He suggested, however, that more could be done in relation to transparency. It ought to be possible to reveal more of how the Agreement works in practice (as opposed to the concrete product).

- He emphasised that the new British Government are very keen on, and protective of, the Agreement and its institutions. They will do nothing to damage these. They hoped, however, that the new Irish Government might be willing to contemplate slightly greater information about the Secretariat and its activities entering the public domain than has happened hitherto.

- I reiterated a number of reservations which we have on this score and suggested that, in view of the current security threat against the Secretariat, the present circumstances would not be conducive to our assuming a higher public profile. Chilcot took this point fully.

Yours sincerely



David Donoghue
Joint Secretary