

Dermot Nally Papers

UCDA P254/9

ROINN AN TAOISIGH

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SECRET AND PERSONAL

"Diner" Meeting

Wednesday, 9 June, 1993.

1. Prior to the "Diner" meeting proper, I had a private "fireside chat" with Sir Robin Butler, Secretary to the Cabinet, for about 25 minutes. The main points covered are set out underneath. As neither of us took notes, this is not a comprehensive account of our conversation.

- On the British side, the main objective was to revive the talks, broadly along the same lines as before. They would hope to keep us on board in this regard.
- I re-affirmed our support for the talks process but indicated that there were serious doubts on our side as to the likely success of the revival effort. Sir Robin referred to the political situation in the House of Commons. The likelihood was that the Government would lose the Christchurch by-election. This would reduce their majority in the House to 17. He also referred to the strong attack which the former Chancellor, Mr. Norman Lamont, had made on the Prime Minister in the Commons earlier that day. Political morale in the Conservative Party was low at present. The Government were also facing into a tranche of difficult expenditure cuts with a view to reducing their EBR.
- Sir Robin then referred to the position of the Unionist M.P.s and added that they were a relevant factor in a reducing majority situation for the Government. At the same time, he made the point that the Government had no intention of making any deals with the Unionists. In a Parliamentary situation where the Government's majority was small in relative terms (and reducing) and bearing in mind the dissident stance adopted by backbenchers from time to time, the Government were not in a position to "force the Unionists into anything". The Prime Minister occupied the centre ground in a Party, which nowadays had strong left and right wings.
- Sir Robin referred to the recent Liaison Group Meeting which he said, according to reports which had reached him, had been successful in determining convergence of interests as between the British and Irish sides. I said that based on the report which I had received (orally) I had a different perception of the outcome of that meeting (i.e. a very much "as you were" situation with nothing new for consideration). Sir Robin expressed surprise at this. I said we would return to the matter at the "Diner" meeting.

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- We discussed arrangements for the meeting between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister. Proceedings would commence at 6.00 p.m., with a tete-a-tete. While this was in progress, a Ministerial meeting, involving the Foreign Secretary, the Northern Ireland Secretary, the Tánaiste and the Minister for Justice, would take place. The Foreign Secretary had to leave before 7.30 p.m. and, for this reason, it was suggested that the plenary might commence between 6.45 p.m. and 7.00 p.m. On the British side, a short meeting with the press at 7.30 p.m. was envisaged (outside No. 10). Later, at the "Diner" meeting proper, Sir Robin indicated that their side would prefer not to have any communique on this occasion. The plenary would be followed by Supper which would conclude at about 9.00 p.m. (or later, if necessary). Dinner in No. 10 would be on an eight-a-side basis.
- The agenda for the meeting would consist of North/South political affairs, security matters and the forthcoming European Council meeting. It was suggested that E.C. affairs be taken before Dinner (and the departure of the Foreign Secretary) and that Northern Ireland be discussed over Dinner.
- Sir Robin raised the question of a notetaker for the Taoiseach during the tete-a-tete. I said that I would undertake this function, subject to further consultation with the Taoiseach.
- We then proceeded to join the other participants attending the "Diner" meeting.

2. Summary of "Diner" Meeting

Discussion, as is usual on these occasions, ranged over a wide variety of aspects of the Northern Ireland situation and also touched on the forthcoming European Council meeting in Copenhagen. On our side, we followed the lines of the briefing material prepared by Mr. Sean O hUiginn (letter of 8 June, 1993 etc.) which had been cleared by the Taoiseach in advance. The main points which emerged might be summarised as follows:

- Prime Minister Major is in trouble politically. As a consequence, British minds are focused on other matters and not on Northern Ireland. This was not a moment to take risks.
- The Secretary of State had met with Mr. Molyneaux. The outcome of that meeting was not very positive. Mr.

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Molyneaux had made unspecified statements blaming both Governments for the DUP success at the recent local elections and, as a consequence, the disappointing outcome for the OUP despite their best efforts (this analysis was challenged by our side). Relations between the OUP and the DUP were "frosty" in the aftermath of the local elections. Mr. Molyneaux had indicated that he would talk to John Hume on Strand I at a later stage (but not until after his talks with Sinn Fein were concluded). On Strand II, the Official Unionists were totally opposed to joint sovereignty which they believed the Irish Government were pursuing. They did not favour multilateral negotiations on Stormont Hill. In essence, they were only prepared to consider low key contacts.

- Mr. Chilcot reported that Mr. Molyneaux had been critical of views attributed to both Governments, to the effect that his Party would do well at the local elections at the expense of the DUP. He was inclined to blame others for his political misfortunes. Mr. Chilcot said that, while Mr. Molyneaux hates the format of the talks, he did accept the terms of reference of March 1991. In Chilcot's view, it would not be possible to get back to three-stranded process as before. He spoke again of a British paper on possible convergence. At the same time, he acknowledged that this might not produce results for some time (perhaps 6 to 9 months).
- John Hume, in his meeting with the Secretary of State, had argued that the British Government should adopt a more proactive position (not that of an arbitrator). The S.D.L.P. had gone into the talks with a rational analysis, not demanding a united Ireland. In their presentation, they had advocated the concept of separation of powers. They had suggested that the British Government should adopt a more forward position.
- The proposed British paper, to be launched in the context of new talks (if such happen) was still evolving. Our well-known concerns in this regard were reiterated.
- For our part, we raised the realistic possibility of talks, the method or definition of convergence as interpreted by the British side (but not accepted by us) and in general questioned whether their scenario would work.
- Sir Robin Butler acknowledged that the talks process were in the doldrums and that they now needed the "best puff" from both Governments if there was to be any likelihood

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of success. Mr. David Fell (Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service), who made a number of helpful interventions at the meeting, stressed the urgency of continuing the pursuit of an accommodation through political dialogue.

- On security, there was a brief reference to an exchange of information between Secretary Dalton and Permanent Secretary John Chilcot: no substantive discussion ensued.

- EC Issues

There was some discussion on the topics which are likely to come up at the forthcoming European Council meeting. The following points arose:-

- . The agenda would include:

Yugoslavia, Russia, (Yeltsin would not now be in Copenhagen: the EC-Russia Agreements were not ready yet).
Central and Eastern European issues (which we were told are largely resolved).
Prime Minister Balladour's paper (not yet received),
Enlargement (language needs to be right: no difficulty expected).
Subsidiarity (this was important for the British side: the House of Lords has not yet completed consideration of the Maastricht Bill),
Economic prospects: a two-part discussion was envisaged - the Edinburgh Conclusions were being implemented on track (British view - we said we might have a problem in this regard and that we might have to seek the assistance of their Prime Minister):
Secondly, longer-term discussion - problem of social costs (Delors in agreement with view that he ought to be stimulating thought for the next EC meeting rather than specific Conclusions for Copenhagen).

- . Reference was made to a possible Special European Council in the Autumn. The British were wary of this idea. As they see it, the wounds of Maastricht were starting to heal. They were not anxious to re-open these. Also, they would not suggest embarking on matters for the next inter-Governmental Conference scheduled for 1996 in 1993.

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- . GATT: the British side hope there will be no detailed discussion.
- . Sites of Institutions. Likewise, the British hope that this will not arise on this occasion. It was described as a "no go area" for the U.K.
- . We suggested that some consideration might have to be given to Somalia and Sudan in the light of recent events. It was not unlikely that the Taoiseach would be asked questions by the media on these countries at his Press Conferences on 16 June.
- . Sir Robin Butler mentioned that Prime Minister Major had been very unlucky over Maastricht.

- Conclusion

The main points which emerged from our meeting, as reported orally to the Taoiseach and Tánaiste, might be summarised as follows:

- . The political situation in the U.K. at present is one of uncertainty. As the British see it, this is "not a moment to take risks". As regards Northern Ireland, their minds are clearly elsewhere.
- . The Northern Ireland Office are suggesting that there is more convergence between the Irish and British sides than exists in reality. They are anxious to boost the talks process and to have our support in this regard.
- . When the British side was pressed on their interpretation of convergence and the realistic possibility of talks, their views and analysis, as such, did not stand up in our estimation. Nonetheless, they did not change course.
- . For our part, we would continue to support the talks process in public. At the same time, we stressed, in private, the necessity to recognise that the process had run out of steam. In effect, as viewed from Government Buildings in Dublin, the British appear to be flogging a dead horse, so far as reviving the process is concerned.
- . There was now a real credibility problem i.e. we were all pursuing something which nobody really believed in.

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- . While we were aware of anxieties on the part of the British side and, for our part, did not wish to add to present troubles, the situation remained that if both Governments are serious about the prospect of reaching an accommodation, then it would be necessary to think of a further (more ambitious) approach.
- . There was no sign of any new thinking on the British side or even of recognising that there was a problem overall.
- . Sir Robin Butler, throughout the entire evening, was clearly following the Northern Ireland Office brief: there was no sign of any real engagement on his part in the Northern Ireland process.
- . Notwithstanding the foregoing, the meeting was useful as it provided an opportunity for us to convey at the highest official level our sense of disenchantment at the current state of play. Sir Robin Butler acknowledged that he felt "uncomfortable" about the evening's proceedings. For our part, the occasion was beneficial, from the point of view of getting across our concerns in advance of next week's Summit-level meeting.

FM

Frank Murray,
10 June, 1993.

c.c. Mr. Noel Dorr,
Secretary,
Department of Foreign Affairs.

Ambassador J. Small,
London.

Mr. S. O hUiginn,
Assistant Secretary,
Department of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. D. O'Donovan,
Anglo-Irish
Secretariat.

Mr. T. Dalton,
Secretary,
Department of Justice.