

(2)

Confidential

29 March 1996

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

Dear Séan

Conversation with Joe Hendron

I met Joe Hendron at a function in Belfast last night.

He was in fairly downbeat mood, adding to the various signals of despondency which we have had from the SDLP over the past week or so.

As I mentioned to you, the party's newly formed Council is to meet tomorrow at the Wellington Park Hotel in Belfast to decide the position which the SDLP will take on the package unveiled by the Prime Minister last week.

This follows a smaller meeting which took place at the party's HQ in Belfast last Tuesday after the meeting with Michael Ancram and which voiced considerable unhappiness both at the decision reached on the form of election and at the forum aspect of the package.

Hendron firmly expects from tomorrow's meeting a decision to take part in the election but to stay out of the forum. Whether this will be made clear after the meeting remains to be seen. Hendron expects that Hume will probably ask his colleagues to keep the matter under wraps for the time being - but may, of course, himself break silence on it at some point.

Hendron would personally like to see the party take a position which would not close doors definitively on the possibility of entering the forum. He would like flexible language to be agreed which would allow the SDLP to review its position in the light of, for example, positive developments in the all-party talks. He will be contacting Séan Farren and Eddie McGrady today to muster support for this approach. He regards it as a foregone conclusion, however, that a majority will support Hume and Mallon and go for a categorical rejection of participation in the forum.

The party will probably produce an election manifesto which presents the election as feeding directly into the all-party talks and either avoids all reference to the forum or dismisses it as an irrelevance.

Hume's overriding concern, as Hendron describes it, is to keep Sinn Féin and the IRA pointed firmly towards democracy and political engagement. Quite apart from fears about Unionist intentions in relation to the forum, Hume cannot contemplate a situation in which the SDLP would be in the forum but Sinn Féin (as he fully expects) would not be. This would not only be electorally very dangerous for the SDLP but would undermine the joint approach which he judges to be essential to the success of the peace process.

Others in the party tend to focus more on the signs (including David Trimble's speech last weekend) that the Unionists see the forum as the main centre of activity and have no intention of engaging seriously in the all-party talks. Recalling the UUP's conduct in all previous exercises of this kind, Hendron expects a progressive accumulation of status and influence by the forum. He would not be surprised, for example, if the Unionists were to seek a Speaker for it (rather than a Chairman) and to present it in other ways as effectively an Assembly. As the SDLP see it, the Unionists are being granted significant progress in Strand One terms before they have even entered the three-stranded talks.

A major element in the SDLP psyche at present is a sense of isolation and abandonment by both Governments. There is a strong view on the part of Hume and Mallon that the Irish Government could have done more to support SDLP concerns on an election and a forum. Furthermore, various suggestions from Dublin that it is for the NI parties to decide where they stand on the package have not been well received because they mean in effect that the SDLP must take the hard decisions on their own.



305/4

- 3 -

Hume has been in very irritable form recently and more preoccupied than usual with his health (as Hendron wryly remarked, "the only illness he doesn't have is hypochondria"). Beyond this personal dimension, however, there is a wider disaffection in the party as a whole, which Seamus Mallon in particular has been articulating. There is a deep sense that the SDLP is on its own (which, as Hendron observed, can bring elements of paranoia with it). Mallon emphasised at last Tuesday's meeting that "we have no friends left anywhere" and that the party must attend first and foremost to its own interests.

In response, I expressed the hope that, once the SDLP has overcome its initial (and understandable) disappointment at the package, a sense of balance and proportion will return. What counts above all is the fixing of a date for all-party talks. A long-standing objective for John Hume has therefore been achieved. The SDLP should focus its sights very clearly on those talks and keep the intervening stages in perspective.

I emphasised the scale of the Government's efforts to dissuade the British Government from the electoral route and, when that proved impossible, to secure an election on the list basis favoured by the SDLP. The prolonged endeavours on the part of the Taoiseach and the Tanaiste in both respects were both known to the SDLP and a matter of public record. The Government also invested enormous energy, successfully, in securing a forum of minimal significance which was clearly decoupled from the talks. Public comments by the Government on last week's package were intended in a helpful spirit as a means of giving the SDLP maximum room for manoeuvre in terms of deciding its own position.

Hendron accepted all of these points. He went on to make clear that he himself feels that the Government could not have achieved more than it did. Referring to general complaints by Hume (voiced at last Tuesday's meeting) about the Government's receptiveness to nationalist concerns, he said that, in contrast to his colleagues, he believes that the right approach for any Irish Government is to demonstrate sensitivity to both traditions on equal terms. He added, however, that he is very much in a minority within his party on this point.

The SDLP are conscious that a decision not to enter the forum will leave them wide open to criticism from the Unionists and the British Government and that it may not earn them "a round of applause in Dublin either". They feel, however, that, taking everything into account, they have no choice. They are also aware that the decision might be reciprocated by a Unionist boycott of the all-party talks. Again, they feel they have no choice in the matter. They do not want to find themselves in the role of scapegoat in those circumstances.

305/5

- 4 -

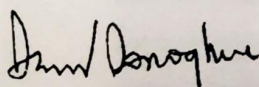
but expect this to happen.

A balancing consideration for them is that, given current Unionist behaviour, the prospects for a successful outcome to the forthcoming talks are not high. As Mallon put it last Tuesday, "these talks are going nowhere". In other words, if the SDLP's absence from the forum were to bring these talks into jeopardy, many in the SDLP would not regard this as the end of the world.

As for the election, Hendron himself is fairly relaxed about the form chosen. The emphasis on party rather than personality, he freely admitted, will help him in any "political beauty contest" with Gerry Adams. The campaign should also be a useful warm-up for his constituency people in preparation for the vital general election campaign next spring.

In conclusion, Hendron mentioned that the SDLP are due to meet the Secretary of State at 5.45pm next Monday (I understand in Belfast).

Yours sincerely



David Donoghue  
Joint Secretary