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NOTE OF THE BILATERAL SESSION WITH THE SDLP HELD AT PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS ON THE MORNING OF 7 MAY 1991

Government Team

Secretary of State
Minister of State
PUS
Mr Fell
Mr Pilling
Mr Thomas
Mr McNeill

SDLP

Mr Hume
Mr Mallon
Mr Hendron
Mrs Rodgers

Talks Secretariat

Mr D J R Hill
Mr Hallett

Also present

Mr Pawson

A bilateral meeting was held with the SDLP at Parliament Buildings on 7 May. It began at 10.50 and concluded at 11.10.

2. The Government Team said that a problem had arisen regarding the venue for the second strand of talks and this had become known to the media. The SDLP favoured Dublin, with Armagh as a fallback. The Alliance wanted Belfast. The Unionists favoured London. These positions were mutually exclusive. The Government Team was therefore exploring the scope for resolving the problem.

3. The SDLP Delegation expressed concern about public statements by Unionist spokesmen about the venue problem, their wish to have Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution removed and about the current meeting of the British/Irish inter-parliamentary body.

3. With regard to the problem of the venue, the SDLP Delegation said that they could agree to alternation between London and Dublin and to the starting venue being decided on the toss of a coin. They could also accept a symbolic opening at Armagh. It would be difficult to find any location which was completely neutral.

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Stormont was not neutral for the SDLP but they had nevertheless agreed to the first strand talks starting there. If it would help, the SDLP would accept the Dublin sessions being held in the Throne room at Dublin Castle which should have strong positive symbols for Unionists.

4. The Government Team said that the essence of the Unionist position derived from Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution. As long as these Articles remained in force, the Unionists considered it impossible for them to negotiate in Dublin.

5. The SDLP Delegation said that the Unionists should understand that Governments also had their constituencies. Successful resolution of matters such as Articles 2 and 3 required good will on all sides. If the Unionists were going to raise a series of obstacles, this would cause a reaction among SDLP supporters and the time devoted to the talks could be better spent elsewhere.

6. The SDLP Delegation made clear their concern about any suggestion that the second strand of talks might take place in Europe, the costs of which would be excessive. The Government Team acknowledged the practical difficulties and said that they had detected no groundswell of support for a European location. It was important to try to find a neutral venue.

7. The SDLP Delegation expressed the view that the problem was one for the Secretary of State to resolve. The SDLP had outlined its position and would be flexible.

8. The Government Team said that the point would have to be resolved before the substantive negotiations could begin. The SDLP Delegation agreed. The Government Team said that at present the problem was one of mutual exclusivity of positions. It was not possible for the Government to resolve the problem by itself.

9. The SDLP reiterated that they had shown flexibility by agreeing to meet in Parliament Buildings, despite its negative symbolism for Nationalists. They had also shown flexibility on strand two by agreeing to alternation between London and Dublin. That was a

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reasonable position. The Northern Ireland problem had arisen in the first place as a result of allowing the Unionists to veto the majority will of the Irish people and the UK Parliament. Since then, no settlement had been based on the will of the people. That was the reason for the SDLP's proposed referenda.

10. The Government Team concluded by thanking the SDLP and said that their remarks had been helpful. They would now meet the other delegations to see how the matter could be resolved and asked the SDLP delegation to remain available for further meetings.

TALKS SECRETARIAT

CAIN: Sean Farren Papers (https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/sean_farren/)