

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2014/105/825
Creation Date(s):	15 November 1984
Extent and medium:	5 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
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SECRET



15 November 1984 6pm

IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

FURTHER DISCUSSION WITH SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG, SECRETARY TO THE CABINET

1. I had one and a half hours with Robert Armstrong in his office this afternoon. We were alone and the atmosphere was very good.
2. At the outset I said that I felt neither of us was acting on direct instructions. What I saw us as doing was trying before the Summit to feel out difficulties and possibilities on either side in relation to this unusual "cooperative negotiation" we had been engaged in - which, over the very recent past appeared to be going through a somewhat rocky phase. He agreed and said "the Prime Minister does not know that I am meeting with you now".
3. I suggested there were three aspects in particular to talk about - what he had told me on the phone last night of the negative reaction to our speaking note of Monday last; the possibilities in general; and how things would go at the Summit, including in particular the communique.
4. He explained the PM's reaction to our speaking note as based on the belief that we were in effect giving up on the process we had engaged in and putting a hardened, firmed up, position on record. I explained that as our Ministers had seen it, it was the "spanner in the works" (devolution as some kind of necessary condition and majority rule at that), newly introduced by their side at our meeting in Dublin on 2/3 November that had hardened positions. The feeling in Dublin was that their position on this was not even really coherent or thought out and that there was now a great deal of slippage indeed as compared with what we had both been working towards. Accordingly Dublin felt it necessary to state our positions quite clearly in reply.

5. [redacted] said that he and others, if not the Prime Minister, had seen and understood this. By the end of the meeting, she had come round a good deal. (I understood him to be saying in effect that the PM had been rather difficult for much of the time but had been mollified a good deal by the end of the discussion).

6. Armstrong sees a need at the Summit to re-confirm the PMs commitment to the process we have been engaged in. He believed that she did want to do something - otherwise he should not have become so deeply engaged himself. But as our discussions lead to more and more of an outline being filled in, she "jibs" a bit (my word not his) at what she sees and wonders if it is possible to go on. However she can be brought past each such stage. The summit at best can be an occasion to confirm her commitment; get a renewed sense of urgency across to her; and see at least what lines of approach have to be ruled out.

7. (NOTE: This was not a very upbeat account of the prospects but it was, within limits, a somewhat more hopeful view of where things now stand than I had got from him on the phone last night. He was saying in effect, in a sober rather than an optimistic way, that with a further effort by the Taoiseach to get across his sense of urgency, there could be a re-commitment by Mrs. Thatcher to our discussions and some indication of what is on and what is not on. But, in face of the "hiccups" of the past week or two and the general difficulty of facing the outline of an approach as it begins to emerge, such a re-commitment or re-confirmation that it is all worthwhile and necessary is now required).

8. Armstrong said that the PMs idea of time-scale for action is much less pressing than ours and we need to re-communicate to her some of our sense of urgency.

9. On other points in our position, he had the following comments. The abolition of the UDR - they had not really got as far as that at their meeting yesterday. (Translation: They had spent the time trying to get things in general back on the rails when she reacted negatively to our speaking note as a whole and they did not get around to some of the detail towards the end). He said however that they thought on their side that

this was a new position we had taken (seeking complete abolition of UDR).

10. They have recently brought in the Chief Constable Hermon on their side. His reaction was that a RESIDENT Irish presence in Belfast would be a major focus of attack (physical). Armstrong seemed to think this problem could be got over.

11. He also thought that what I have called the spanner in the works could somehow be got over. He accepted in large part my comment that their position is not very coherent on this point. He said they had not really done a lot of thinking on it so far. It seemed as if the practical, "lamp-post" problem raised by NIO officials (an excess of detail to consult with Dublin on if there were no devolution had carried a lot of weight as an argument in their discussions.

12. More generally I explored with him the issue of a balanced package. We had started with their requirement of a declaration or action to ensure that such a declaration would not be found unconstitutional in return for certain measures they would take (involvement of security forces and reciprocity across the border zone). We had offered the Sunningdale formula and looked for joint authority. They had said that would not be adequate. We had said we would be ready to think of Constitutional change in return for an adequate package. Now we felt the emerging package is inadequate and not balanced.

13. There would now seem to be two ways to go - (a) try for balance at a "shallower level" ie something like the Sunningdale formula in return for a somewhat improved version of their present ideas (with no Constitutional change); or (b) try for a deeper more radical balance. Here I - personally and speculatively brought in my point about a "common guarantee" on one side. What on the other? I outlined some thoughts including the idea that one should talk of specifics and put them down in a list (not emotive general concepts such as "joint authority" and "consultation"); also one could perhaps single out some specific things such as nominations or appointments which would require agreement and show these separately from the general

statement on according Dublin a role etc.etc. (I have not time in haste to spell this out).

14. He was interested enough but thought exploration of these ideas would have to come after the Summit when and if we continue the process as he hopes.

15. In response to my sounding on the point he said he would not rule out the possibility that one could revert to the shallower balance approach ie something like the Sunningdale formula. I said our view was of course that what such a package would contain on the other side would be inadequate to the problem and there were only a limited number of chances to "tinker with it" without making it worse.

16. He in turn thought there was the germ of an idea not yet explored in the thought that a role for Dublin could be made more acceptable to the Unionists if it related only to the minority. One could say to Unionists - "none of your business" in such a case. I saw problems but thought it worth looking at at least.

17. Mrs. Thatcher's difficulty is that she thinks she could not deliver the Unionists for certain things. I said we saw it rather that if the constitutional position was adequately guaranteed they would have to face down the Unionists. What we had to do was to deliver the nationalist tradition.

18. In general he advised that Mrs. Thatcher sometimes as at Fontainebleu takes up tough positions in advance - as it were to impress and "frighten" almost, her own delegation. She can be got to move from these hardline stances at the meeting itself. He thought there might be an element of this involved here. (I took this as very well meant).

19. Another comment - involvement of Dublin no doubt seemed like

"small beer" to us but on their side, to Mrs. T. it seemed like "very big beer indeed". He really saw it as a major hurdle they would have crossed. I said that the issue is not what would happen over a few years if implemented but how to "sell" it now in a referendum as adequate

200 As to the communique - perhaps the Taoiseach should sound out what she might be willing to agree to on Sunday night. We could then work at official level. She does not yet seem ready for the reasonably substantial approach I had given him but he saw a possibility at least (no more) that she might agree to it with the Taoiseach (with details to be worked on). At present she sees the right approach as what they had sent to us on 9/11 (?). I said, without negotiating on it of course, that we would probably at a minimum need some references to the Forum Report at least in what is attributed to the Taoiseach; something more on "expressing identity" not just "recognising rights" (He said she will ask what it means); and something more substantial perhaps on the object of the dialogue mentioned in the last par.

The above is somewhat disjointed - done in extreme haste. My discussions generally was very friendly and we were both seeking ways out of difficulties to a greater extent than I have conveyed. The overall message for me is that things are not really off course, but optimism must certainly be very muted at present

Don

N Dorr 15/11/84

ps
I forgot to say that he sees very great difficulties about an "executive" approach (involving Dublin) - much too much the sound of "joint authority" for Mrs. T.