

(19)

Report of a Meeting of the full SDLP Delegation with the
Secretary of State and the NIO Team at 11.25am Wednesday
8 May, 1991

SOS I believe we may be in some difficulties and therefore I want to clarify the position of the various parties as I understand it, and with reference to where we left off last night.

The Alliance Party are flexible about phase two but have a practical preference for Belfast.

The SDLP are prepared to contemplate alternating between GB and this island - are prepared to accept London as the GB venue, and London for the first meeting. They have a preference for Dublin as the Irish venue but are prepared to contemplate a meeting or meetings including a symbolic meeting in Armagh.

The Unionists insist on GB for phase two with a preference for London, but they are prepared to consider other GB locations. They are prepared to contemplate a meeting later in the process in Northern Ireland - not in the Stormont estate but with no other preference as to place in Northern Ireland. There is a certain fuzziness about visiting Dublin at a late stage in the process, but they are not ruling it out totally. This may well embrace strand three as well as strand two.

The Irish Government are willing to alternate venues. Ideally they would wish to see the first meeting on this island, possibly in Armagh, with the venue then alternating between Dublin and London with the first leg to be determined by the toss of a coin. They are not clear however about the length of the various legs.

JH

We have put forward the possibility of an opening meeting in Armagh and going on to alternate between London and Dublin. We believe that a European venue would be far too costly and impracticable and would hold us up to ridicule. As to the lengths of the alternating legs, we believe that a rough 50/50 split would be fair. If we are going in to serious talks and if governments are going to be asked to make serious changes, including in their constitution, it is simply insulting to say that you will not meet them in their own territory. Frankly we are fed up with the continual emergence of new pre-conditions at every stage of this process. We might have done the same. For instance we did not wish to come to Parliament Buildings and we detailed our reasons for that, but the Secretary of State made a decision and we accepted it reluctantly. We believe that the SOS should do the same again. We don't have any hang ups about which venue is first.

I would like to make it clear in relation to all of these talks that we believe strongly that confidentiality should be maintained, and that the Alliance Party should be told that. I have also notified the two Unionist leaders of my concern about remarks made by one of their delegates.

I have had a meeting with the two Unionist leaders and they suggested a European venue. I have told them our position on this.

Incidentally, they told me that you (SOS) had said to them that they would have to be flown up and down to Dublin every day, and therefore they interpreted you as being against Dublin as a venue.

- Dr M It is only fair to point out that we also made it clear that Dublin was a much cheaper option than Europe.
- SOS In fact, the point I was making was that it would be cheaper to fly up and down than to provide security in Dublin.
- Dr M John, when you say Dublin and London, do you mean London and Dublin or do you mean GB and the Republic.
- JH We mean Dublin and London - that is our proposal.
- Dr M Would you rule out alternative locations in GB and the Republic?
- JH No specific proposal has been made to us in this regard. Venues other than the capitals would seem pointless. Both capitals would be more convenient and would have all the facilities. If that was the argument for having the first strand in Stormont we can't see why it should be any different for the second. However I don't understand the point of all this. If there is an emotional problem with their going South then the location doesn't change that. We have suggested that we meet in the Throne Room of Dublin Castle which should give the Unionists quite enough symbolism to cover their backs.
- Dr M But would you rule out alternative locations in GB and the Republic.
- JH Our proposal is Dublin and London. However I am concerned that the Unionist delegations are not all being told what our position is. (JH repeats SDLP position).