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Reference Code: 2004/7/2674

Title: Draft memorandum written by Noel Dorr, counsellor in the Information Section of the Department of Foreign Affairs, on proposed press arrangements for the Sunningdale Conference.

Creation Date(s): 28 November, 1973

Level of description: Item

Extent and medium: 3 pages

Creator(s): Department of Foreign Affairs

Access Conditions: Open

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PRELIMINARY TALKS AT OFFICIAL LEVEL -
Dublin 28 and 29 November 1973

Discussion of Press Arrangements for Conference.

1 The initial British position appeared to be that

- (i) Access to the Conference would not be available to journalists.
- (ii) They did not themselves intend to provide a press centre and press facilities nearby though they accepted that there would be a considerable press influx. They seemed to envisage perhaps making preliminary block bookings at some nearby hotel on behalf of the press - or at least alerting such a hotel. The actual arrangements, however, including all costs would be left to the press themselves i.e. there would be nothing like our arrangements in regard to press centres, entertainment etc. for the Baldonnell meeting in September.
- (iii) There would be a short bland agreed statement at the end of each days proceedings and nothing more for the press. A full communique would issue at the end of the Conference with the agreement of all the parties.

In general, initial British ideas seem to contemplate taking the talks on the Executive in Belfast between Mr. Whitelaw and the Northern Ireland Parties as a model i.e. the parties would closet themselves away from the press and essentially say nothing to the press until the end of the Conference.

2 In the course of the official level talks we put the view that

- (a) The situation was not analogous to that of the Belfast talks for many reasons.
- (b) The idea that information to the press from participants should be limited to a short agreed statement each day would probably not be accepted. A better approach might be for the participants to consider on the opening day of the Conference how they would deal with the press. One approach might be to give some time at the conclusion of each days discussion to agreeing broadly on what might and might not be communicated to the press by official spokesmen for each of the participants.
- (c) It would be ^{highly} ~~hardly~~ desirable to have organised arrangements for a press centre near the site with full press facilities.
- (d) We would probably wish to have someone go over to London shortly to discuss these matters.

3 It was generally accepted by both sides after some preliminary discussion that it was preferable to work out the details separately and the British side indicated that they would be quite prepared to have someone from ^{our} ~~their~~ side go over to discuss these matters in London shortly.

It was also recognized that Ministers rather than officials would have to decide on some of these matters in relation to the Press.

4 The following points could be made in any subsequent discussions with the British side in support of our view that the situation in relation to press coverage of this Conference is wholly different from that in relation to the talks on the Executive in Belfast over the past two months.

(i) This Conference is an international conference involving two Sovereign Governments - as well as ^{the} three power sharing parties.

(ii) The Prime Ministers and a strong team of Ministers from each Government will be involved.

(iii) There is no valid comparison between a prolonged series of consultations between the Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Political leaders who spend much time in Belfast in any case (if they do not reside there) and a relatively short conference of this kind to which large delegations travel from Dublin, Belfast and London.

(iv) Even in British terms the mere fact that the Prime Minister is substantially preoccupied with this Conference of ^{over 2 or 3 days} ~~2 or 3 December~~ will generate substantial news interest. Presumably his preoccupations each day (miners etc.) are a matter on which there is regular daily Downing Street briefing in any case.

(v) The Belfast talks on the Executive were a long drawn out local story covered by the Belfast correspondents of the Belfast news media. The present Conference will attract not alone the Belfast correspondents of all the British and Irish media as well as the Northern Ireland papers but also political correspondents from Dublin and London and a very considerable foreign press corps.

(vi) The Government here simply cannot be seen to be involved in a situation which would be presented by critics as "the Irish having their heads knocked together by a British Minister or Ministers in order to produce agreement" (^{the} prolonged Belfast discussion on the Executive might crudely be so described).

(vii) The presentation of the whole package settlement ~~in Ireland~~ (of which the Conference is to work out a substantial part) to public opinion in Ireland is vitally important if it is ^{really} intended to be a settlement. Press coverage is therefore not an incidental aspect but of great intrinsic importance. The Irish news media will have a particular communications difficulties which do not ^{really} arise ~~through~~ ^{for} the British press and did not arise in the Belfast talks. We have an interest in seeing that these requirements are met.

5 In general the main point we should try to get across to the British is that their initial approach of having a secluded Conference, with no particular press facilities provided by them and no real contact by any participants with the press until the end (except presumably the "normal" British briefings at home in Whitehall) ~~is~~ is not suitable and will not work. A much better approach is that which we tried, (however successfully) to adopt for the Baldonnell talks i. e.

(i) Provide officially an adequate press centre with adequate facilities as a base on which to focus press interest if it is desired to keep the press away from the Conference venue.

(ii) While accepting that the participants in the Conference may prefer to restrict the amount of what they each communicated to the press try to ensure as far as possible that the press need for material which can be supplied is met.

NDow
28/xi/1973
