

How talk of talks became a document

Praise for new Brooke initiative

Parties study of

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The original "talks about talks" date back to 1987, when Tom King engaged Unionist leaders Jim Molyneux and Ian Paisley in confidential discussion. During it they placed a set of outline proposals on his Stormont Castle desk, aimed at replacing the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

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Devolution

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There was no veto from the Irish Government on devolution moves and matters devolved would be outside the Anglo-Irish Conference's purview, he maintained.

In the following months, he sketched the three sets of relationships involved in his plan. Initial devolutionary talks on Northern Ireland involving only the local parties and the Government would be followed by discussing North-South relationships, and those between London and Dublin.

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Quickly, the Unionists set their conditions for negotiations — a replacement to the Anglo-Irish Agreement must be accepted and workings of the Intergovernmental Conference and its secretariat suspended for dialogue to start.

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By
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Those centred on Dublin's wish for a firm timetable, an early date when they would be guaranteed involvement in formal negotiations. The fear they shared with the SDLP was that the wait for "substantial progress" would be open-ended and, effectively, become a Unionist veto on ever having discussions with Dublin.

Responsibility

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Anxious to prevent the momentum vanishing, the Secretary of State made his September Ballymena speech after more talks about talks.

Outstanding problems were "encouragingly close" to a resolution. But Mr Brooke warned: "In the last analysis I will not shirk my responsibility for the administration of Northern Ireland. That may, indeed, require me at some point to set the pace and show the way."

Around that time, the Ulster Unionists issued a statement saying that they were not prepared to resume meetings with Mr Brooke "until Dublin's territorial claim and the Anglo-Irish Agreement are repudiated".

SDLP deputy leader Seamus Mallon said that Mr Brooke should "tear up" the talks documents and restart "with a clean slate".

In a year-end article in the Belfast Telegraph, Mr Brooke wrote: "Both Governments must aim to reach a situation where each is ready to go the extra mile and be willing to review accepted wisdom."

Arbiter

But, after 12 months of talks searching, 1991 broke with optimism at low ebb.

Alliance leader Dr John Alderice said the initiative had failed and the time had arrived for the Government to put forward its own proposals for structures.

After a January Anglo-Irish Conference Mr Collins said his Government was "prepared to go that last mile" to make talks possible.

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THE Republic's Government has given its full backing to the Secretary of State. Mr Peter Brooke's last-ditch effort to get political talks underway involving the parties in Northern Ireland and the British and Irish governments.

Mr Brooke discussed his latest formula with the Republic's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Gerry Collins, in London last Monday and the text of the confidential document was given to the Irish Government on Wednesday.

The Taoiseach, Mr Charles Haughey, conveyed his positive response directly to the British Prime Minister, Mr John Major.

In a statement, Mr Haughey said he had told Mr Major of his "full acceptance of the formula for substantive talks set out in the document" and expressed his "profound hope that the talks will now get under way and proceed to a successful conclusion."

The Fine Gael spokesman on Foreign Affairs, Mr Jim O'Keefe, praised the painstaking efforts of the Secretary of State to find a positive basis for progress.

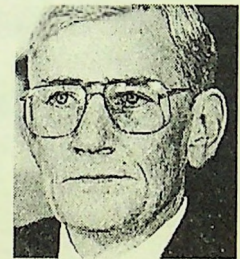
The Labour Party leader, Mr Dick Spring, said the question of when talks would begin had obviously reached a crucial stage and the parties in Northern Ireland should respond in a positive and open manner.



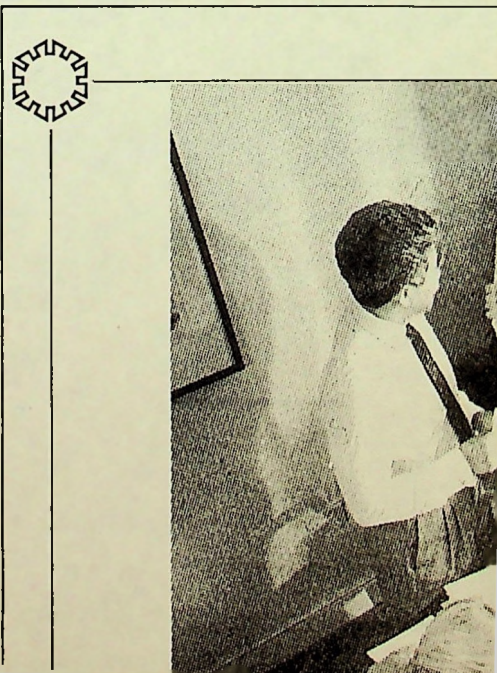
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Mr Alderice — welcome.



Mr Mallon — study.



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In March, the Dublin Supreme Court ruled in the McGimpsey case that Articles 2 and 3 of the Republic's constitution made renunciation "a constitutional imperative". The judgment threatened the talks process, with Mr Paisley saying that it had fundamentally changed the scenario.

The SDLP accused Mr Molyneux of seeking excuses to avoid talks with other parties. He had said the ruling "had eliminated any possible agreement between Unionists and nationalists" so long as the two Articles remained in the constitution.

Gradually Mr Brooke teased out a talks formula. Thursday, July 5, was set for its declaration.

Mr Brooke was to announce details to the Commons. But last minute efforts to resolve the major stumbling block failed only hours before his statement was due.

It involved Dublin's role in inter-party discussions, which had been planned for the autumn. Mr Brooke had been expected to tell MPs of an eight-week gap in Conference meetings to enable discussions to occur. Instead, he said that "modest but valuable"

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With party officials agreeing privately that the initiative was effectively over and momentum lost, Mr Brooke admitted on February 2 that the time to "put up the shutters" may be approaching. A time to call a halt may be approaching and he said: "I am absolutely determined to test the process to destruction before we reach that point."

A document was sent from Dublin before Mr Brooke met the Unionist leaders in February.

Dublin said it contained new proposals. Unionists said it did not. It meant, though, that Dublin agreed that the Secretary of State could be "arbiter" in deciding when the Republic's government could enter the talks framework. But Unionists insisted that this move to "stage two" would only be after consultation with the Northern Ireland parties.

Now, Mr Brooke has replaced the "talks about talks" process with a document — deadline Easter — in which all participants are asked to state whether they can move to full negotiations themselves.

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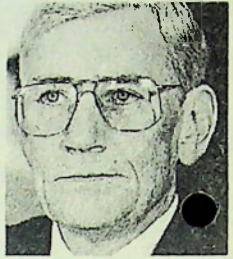
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