

Will Brooke fall victim to his own S

THEY say nothing succeeds like success. And the Northern Ireland Secretary, Mr Brooke, may yet be a victim of his.

Mr Brooke is a modest man: he detests the press habit of associating his name with the initiative which forged the basis for the talks commencing next week. Through the long months of "talks about talks", he has insisted he was no more than "a facilitator", merely helping the parties towards dialogue about their common goals and interests.

The truth is that Mr Brooke had no Downing Street brief to launch a fresh initiative in Northern Ireland — at the time of his arrival. Whitehall wisdom was that internal progress was still mission impossible.

The truth is that Mr Brooke was almost alone, in January 1990, in judging the climate right for movement. His initiative was carried in face of Irish Government, the SDLP and much unionist scepticism. In the early days, at least, only the Alliance Party and elements of the Rev. Ian Paisley's DUP were enthusiastic about "the process."

And many of those making their way to the conference table

are sceptical still.

This is not to say that Mr Brooke is starry-eyed about the prospects. But it will not be lost on him, — or his advisers, that having invested so heavily, he has much to lose.

One school, of course, contends that Mr Brooke cannot fail; that he has already secured the unexpected in getting the parties to the table; and that he can only benefit from a Westminster disposition to regard failed initiatives as the inevitable in what Mr Reginald Maudling once reputedly called that "bloody awful country".

Mr Brooke does not share the view of the former Home Secretary — on the contrary, he has a deep affection for Northern Ireland and its people, a profound sense of his Irish roots, and a desire to help.

Mr Brooke will know that he launched his initiative against the backdrop of widespread disbelief within Northern Ireland that anything could be done; that his success to date has considerably heightened expectations; and that the disappointment of new-found hope could carry damaging consequences.

The Northern Secretary, Mr Brooke, has much to lose if the long-awaited talks on Northern Ireland fail. Frank Millar reports.



In theory, Mr Brooke could measure success or failure by a simple yardstick — is the situation in Northern Ireland post the talks better or worse than when he started in January 1990? But it is barely conceivable that the talks, spanning the three sets of relationships, could run their course over 10 weeks and end in amicable disagreement.

The Irish Government always argued that unless the talks were properly structured — so enhancing the chances of agreement — the resultant failure would give an enormous boost to the IRA.

That apart, failure for the unionists means (as Mr Molyneux and Mr Paisley have accepted) the continuation of the

Anglo-Irish Agreement. And it seems certain that failure will result in strong SDLP pressure, through Dublin, for a further strengthening of the Anglo-Irish processes.

The Irish Government would in that event be well disposed, since it has long feared the unionist purpose is more to damage the existing agreement than to find a new one.

Failure then, for Mr Brooke, seems unlikely to be a gentleman's agreement to disagree. Breakdown rather would point to further polarisation, and the resurfacing of hostilities which had quieted to some degree when Mr Brooke decided to move.

From what is known of him, this would be an unacceptable

outcome for Mr Brooke. Since even the most friendly analysis must allow it as a possibility, the focus then must be on Mr Brooke's role as something more than "facilitator."

It was only when Mr Brooke made good his promise to "set the pace and show the way" that the parties agreed to talk. He will need to do a lot more if they are to reach agreement.

The British Government's ideal would be agreement on a comprehensive settlement. But agreement of virtually any sort will be acceptable. There seems little reason to doubt claims that Mr Brooke is not going into the talks with a precise or particularly detailed blueprint.

The Northern Secretary and his

officials will be on hand to provide neutral analysis of policy issues and questions; and, as chairman, Mr Brooke will have an active role in averting breakdown.

But he will also have to answer critical questions about the British Government's policy, for example, in respect of the scale of powers it is willing to devolve, and its requirements for institutional North/South and Anglo-Irish links.

London would willingly see a new legislature established in Belfast but has real difficulties with proposals for a transfer of security powers. Readiness to consider the principle could give rise to interesting ideas for the separation of anti-terrorist and other "law and order" functions.

Success?

While most unionists equate devolution with the creation of a single authority at Stormont, the British Government does not preclude the possibility of creating a number of new regional authorities. Some unionists fear this could amount to repartition. It is thought London's reservations are largely to do with administrative efficiency.

There is still resistance to Mr Molyneux's agenda for reform of the procedures for dealing with Northern Ireland business at Westminster, although some observers think they might pay the price if it secured unionist involvement in a more comprehensive settlement.

In London's mind, "a comprehensive settlement" would fall a good deal short of that favoured by Mr Hume and Mr Haughey. While London is neutral on the question of the union, it has secured these talks courtesy of implicit unionist acceptance of the assurances given in article one of the Anglo-Irish Agreement that there will be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority.

Mr Brooke has said he regards Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution as unhelpful and — if a serious alternative agreement

was on offer — he might well urge Dublin to withdraw the constitutional claim.

The problem for Mr Brooke — as for the unionists — is that an alternative or transcending agreement must embody the essentials of Hillsborough, or provide something superior.

London is not in the process of abandoning the agreement, or the benefits it has yielded — not least in alleviating American and international criticism of its presence and performance in Northern Ireland.

Yet, to render the existing agreement acceptable to the unionists would mean treating these negotiations as Hillsborough Mark Two, and addressing a unionist agenda previously ignored.

The difficulty with that, is a matter of practical politics. Why would Dublin and the SDLP make concessions for unionist approval of something they already have under their belt?

Mr Brooke, for good or ill, is confined by the ground conceded by his colleagues in 1985.

Tomorrow: Frank Millar looks at the problems all parties will face. Mark Brennoch looks at the position of Sinn Fein.

British

Government