

I N C O N F I D E N C E

SECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETING WITH AN ALLIANCE PARTY DELEGATION  
30 APRIL 1991

Those Present:

Government Team

Secretary of State  
Minister of State  
PUS  
Mr Fell  
Mr Pilling  
Mr Thomas  
Mr McNeill

Alliance Party

Dr Alderdice  
Mr Close  
Mr Neeson

Talks Secretariat

Mr Hill  
Mr Pope

Also present:

Mr Pawson

1. This note summarises the main conclusions of a bi-lateral meeting held between the Secretary of State and an Alliance Party delegation in Parliament Buildings on the afternoon of 30 April 1991. The meeting began at 1440 and ended at 1615. The Secretary of State opened the meeting by setting out the areas which he thought it would be necessary to cover. These were:-

- a) to settle practical arrangements, including media matters;
- b) to agree procedures to be followed during the plenary sessions;
- c) to identify the key issues for discussion;
- d) to consider the order in which these issues might be addressed;
- e) to discuss the general approach to be adopted in the initial plenary sessions;
- f) to talk further about the location of the North/South talks.

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2. Dr Alderdice confirmed that he and his colleagues were happy with the arrangements which had been made for accommodation both for the delegations and for the discussions and with the facilities which had been laid on in terms of word processing, car parking and catering. The question of allowances remained of interest and concern to the Alliance Party. The Government Team explained that they expected HMT agreement very shortly on a revised rate of per diem allowance which, would be above the normal rate, recognising the likely intensity of the discussions. Delegates could also claim appropriate travelling and subsistence allowances. The Alliance Party delegation said that this was helpful since more of their delegates than those of other parties had had to take unpaid leave to attend the talks.

3. It was agreed that the two offices should discuss the arrangements for support staff. The Government Team explained that one set of minutes would be provided for each delegation whose responsibility it would be to provide security. Accommodation would be locked during silent hours but delegates should lock away all items at close of play.

4. The Government Team gave details of the media facilities. The media would not have access to Parliament Buildings itself, avoiding the possibility of door-stepping. The Alliance Party said privacy and confidentiality were important but the talks were not secret. Too tight a restriction on media activities could be counter-productive leading to speculation, to attempts to gain access to relatively junior members of political parties and to attempts to rubbish the whole process. Confidentiality, while appropriate in the eyes of those involved in the talks, could provoke irrational and unhelpful responses. The Government Team noted the points - delegates might take a more relaxed approach as the process developed, but some might be uncomfortable with too close a level of media attention at the outset.

5. The Alliance Party expressed concern that some individuals who had not previously been closely connected in the public eye with political activity might become so as a result of the talks process. It would be helpful if RUC advice could be offered to them. It was agreed that Mr McNeill would introduce Dr Alderdice and his colleagues to Superintendent Curral, RUC Security Branch immediately after the meeting.

6. Procedural Matters

The Government Team set out their view as to how the plenary sessions might be conducted. Since Monday 6 May was a Bank Holiday, it was proposed to meet on the Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday if the Alliance Party were content. The Alliance Party confirmed that they were. The Government Team said that the style would be informal with opportunities for breaks and caucus meetings as and when necessary. The Chairman would have the power to propose an adjournment for bi-lateral discussions and parties would have the ability to seek an adjournment with the consent of the Chair or the unanimous consent of all parties - this latter arrangement was designed to ensure that no one party could hold up proceedings. The Chair would be able to vary the order of agenda items with the aim of ensuring that the momentum of business was maintained. The Alliance Party confirmed that they were content with these proposals.

7. Key Issues

The Alliance Party were invited to say how they saw matters developing and what items they thought would need to be covered during plenary sessions. They confirmed that none of the issues raised thus far caused problems for the Party and that their document of January 1990 had set out the issues that they would wish to cover. They thought that since only the Unionist parties had been in direct negotiation with each other there was a natural tendency for parties to regard each other with suspicion. Those involved should come to see each other as individuals and not as a problem to be tackled and there were various ways in which this could be achieved. Parties might

be allowed to offer their analysis of the situation which could then be subject to cross-examination and clarification. This might identify areas of agreement and disagreement but structures for dealing with these should not be discussed at that stage. Active chairmanship would be needed for each party's analysis to be explored, for the options to be considered and the level of agreement to be measured. Each party should be able to see the situation in "win - win" terms. This approach was based on a belief that all those involved were responsible people and were coming to the talks process with the aim of achieving the best outcome for the community. The Government Team indicated that this process had attractions since it not only allowed others to absorb views but gave each delegation a full opportunity to express their views.

8. The Alliance Party then set out the key issues which they felt it would be necessary to address. These were:-

a) NI Assembly - this should act as a focus and it would be necessary to address its structure and its establishment.

b) Executive Functions

Any assembly should have legislative and executive functions. It was extremely important for the Alliance Party that these functions should be discharged on a shared or partnership basis.

c) Scrutiny

All those elected to any Assembly must be able to play a part in it and the Alliance view was that proportionate committees should be established to carry out a scrutinising role.

d) Test of Acceptability

Any new administration would have to have wide acceptance if it was to work. An institutional definition of acceptability and a test of acceptability would be necessary.

e) Constitutional safeguards and protection of minority rights

No single party in Northern Ireland was a majority party. The rights of all political minorities and civil and political rights generally would need to be protected.

f) Cross-border co-operation

There would need to be some kind of institutional arrangement governing the relationship between the Government in Northern Ireland and the Irish Government especially in regard to economic matters.

g) Anglo-Irish context

Good working relationships with London and Dublin were essential. "Anglo-Irish context" was a healthier way of addressing the arrangement than the term "Irish Dimension".

h) Security control

A local political input into security was vital. This was a sensitive and controversial area that must be addressed although it was accepted that a solution would not be easy to find.

i) Relations with Europe

Post 1992 not only regional government but also major cities in various countries would seek to establish separate contacts with Brussels. This would lead to a complex series of relationships and it was important that any Northern Ireland Assembly took account of major changes in Europe and could fit in with developments.

j) Permanance

The weakness of the 1973 agreement was that it was seen as a halfway house to a United Ireland. Any new institution needed acceptability and confirmation of a degree of permanence and there was a case for grounding it solidly from the outset.

9. The Government Team asked what relationship the Alliance Party saw between the task of finding an internal settlement and that of reaching an accommodation between both parts of Ireland. The Alliance Party said that it was easier for them to approach this question than for either of the Unionist or Nationalist parties. Certain changes within the Republic of Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland's approach to matters might open up new approaches and generousities within Northern Ireland. Such a relationship could be conducted through structures but it was difficult to be precise about these at present.

10. The Government Team then set out a list of issues which it believed required discussion in the first strand before the second strand opened. The Government Team undertook to pass a copy to the Alliance Party and to all other parties before the plenary sessions began on 7 May. The checklist was long and there was a need to move briskly.

11. Handling of plenary sessions

The Government Team then turned to the handling of plenary sessions. Parties might be asked to make an opening statement covering their views on the key issues. This would be followed by a process of clarification and a pulling together of common themes to ensure that there was no doubt as to where people stood. Statements could be cross-examined and clarified both through the Chair and from other parties immediately after a statement had been concluded. At the end of this process the Chair would summarise positions to test its understanding of the views and examine whether these views had a degree of agreement. If there was a degree of agreement, discussion might then turn to ways of taking this further although it was recognised that there might be difficulty in reaching agreement on this particular point. The Alliance Party agreed with the general outline that this process should concentrate on principles rather than on structures. There was likely to be some agreement on principles but differences on the structures that might be put in place for taking agreement further. Any agreement on principles could be put in jeopardy by moving on at too early a stage to discussion on structures since parties could take positions on structures which were quite different to those they had taken on principles and aspirations. The Government Team and the Alliance Party agreed that the major aim of the exercise was that of convergence.

12. Location of North/South talks

The Alliance Party said that their initial preference was for some form of neutral location. London might be better than Belfast or Dublin as both the Irish Government and the Nationalist parties might be wary of Belfast. Since discussion might have to move from the second strand back to the first strand, the location should be selected so as to avoid a need to move hundreds of miles to cope with this. Some meetings in Dublin might be possible and this was a reasonable location if agreement could be reached. The overall need was to balance practicality against needs and sensitivities. A neutral

location would be preferable since to highlight sensitivities could hinder a move from the first strand to the second strand and to the process generally.

13. The Government Team noted this view. A range of options was being considered. The first, formal meeting, could be held in Northern Ireland, possibly in Armagh. It might well perhaps not be possible to transact substantive business at such a meeting. Meetings might then take place in London and Dublin on a weekly alternate basis, the first location to be decided on the toss of a coin. Alternation would have advantages for Westminster MP's and for British and Irish Ministers who would be near their base for half the time. It also made the provision of an appropriate level of security and of physical resources easier. The Alliance Party confirmed that they would wish to explore these suggestions and asked whether it was not possible to complete the process at Parliament Buildings. The Government Team thought that this was unlikely to be attractive either to the Unionists or to the Irish Government. The Government Team said that they hoped that agreement would be reached before the plenary sessions began. Both Governments would need time to undertake preparatory work on facilities.

14. The Alliance Party confirmed that they had no further issues which they wished to discuss at this stage. The Government Team noted that there would be close Press interest in the day's proceedings and said that they would, if pressed, merely confirm that talks had taken place. The Government Team said that they looked forward to seeing the Alliance Party delegation on Tuesday 7 May at 1030 while noting that this was contingent on obtaining agreement with the Unionists at the bi-lateral which it was proposed to hold with them on Friday 3 May.

TALKS SECRETARIAT