

ALLIANCE PARTY OF NORTHERN IRELAND

MINUTES OF MEETING HELD BETWEEN SECRETARY OF STATE, NIO OFFICIALS AND ALLIANCE PARTY DELEGATION ON WEDNESDAY 8 MAY 1991 AT 10.30AM IN CONFERENCE ROOM, STORMONT.

PRESENT: John Alderdice, Seamus Close, Sean Neeson, Stewart Dickson Addie Morrow, Eileen Bell, Steve McBride

NIO DELEGATION: Secretary of State, Peter Brooke MP, Under Secretary of State, Brian Mawhinney MP, NIO Officials, London & Belfast.

The meeting opened with the Secretary of State welcoming the Alliance Delegation which was meeting with him and the full team for the first time. He stated that this would be a meeting to have a further discussion re yesterday's difficulties regarding the venue for Strand Two of the talks.

SOS asked the Party Leader if he would outline our current position on this for the information of all those present. Dr Alderdice then reiterated our position which he said had not changed and emphasised to the SOS and his delegation that this particular issue was not a significant one as far as we were concerned. Alliance would be prepared to meet "ANYWHERE THAT IS ACCEPTABLE TO ALL FOR THIS SECTION OF THE TALKS." He repeated that we did have a practical preference for Belfast but that we would accommodate within the general consensus.

The SOS then outlined the positions as of last night of the SDLP and the joint Unionist delegations. SDLP were still opting for London as the first meeting place at this stage and then alternate sittings London/Dublin but would be willing to consider Armagh as an alternative venue to Dublin. SOS stated that as far as he could see this was a symbolic rather than a practical viewpoint. The joint Unionist position was still an insistence in principal for GB preferably near or in London. They expressed a willingness to contemplate a meeting in the later stages of this strand in Northern Ireland but not Stormont. They also, although this was presented with certain amount of fuzziness, have intimated that they would be willing to consider Dublin as a site in the later stages of the process (more likely stage 3).

As regards the Irish Government the SOS had last spoken with them at the week-end and they had stated that they would be flexible about this issue although their preference would be first meeting on the Island of Ireland ie not necessarily Dublin then alternatively Dublin/London.

The Party Leader replied that once again he would emphasise that our considerations of a suitable venue would be from a viewpoint of practicalities rather than of principle and that he trusted that other people would feel as flexible in their attitudes during the course of today's meetings.

Party Leader then went on to outline a number of informal suggestions on possible alternative venues which the SOS and his delegation might think about when looking at the other parties positions in later meetings. He then asked the SOS for confirmation about the stage 3 process and it was confirmed that this would be primarily between the two governments and there was as yet no formal notification of the Republic of Ireland delegation complement.

PL asked the SOS to be aware of the possibility that this stage might be construed as further meetings of the Anglo-Irish Conference and this should be publicly clarified. PL then concluded by stating that we were all aware that this stage was under severe time constraint and he hoped that it would be resolved without further "serious difficulties". SOS concurred with this and said that he would be setting a mental time limit on today's proceedings. PL then stated once again that he would be grateful for the possibility of direct meetings with the other Party Leaders if there was no quick resolution of the difficulties and he also urged the SOS that if all else failed that perhaps he could use the mechanism of taking a positive lead as a last ditch position if agreement not apparent of actually directing future action.

Under SOS, Brian Mawhinney, then asked the PL about Alliance stated position as regards the venue in the unlikely event of the talks breaking down what would the other parties say about that position. PL replied and there was also general discussion about this point between the Alliance and NIO delegations. There was an analysis of the SDLP & Unionist positions as regards the difficulties of yesterday but it was hoped by Alliance that this could be discussed further and other areas would be explored.

PL, on behalf of the Alliance delegation, wished the SOS success in his discussions with the other parties on this issue.

In concluding the meeting the SOS said that he considered this issue was self contained and he was not pessimistic once agreement had been reached on this point re the future progress of the talks generally. In fact the SOS said that these difficulties, once cleared, might lead to even more flexibility in the future.