

MEETING OF THE BUSINESS COMMITTEE - 25 JUNE 1991

Government Team

Minister of State
Mr Thomas

Talks Secretariat

Mr Pope

Delegation Representatives

Mr Close
Mr Empey
Mr Haughey
Mr Robinson

A meeting of the Business Committee took place at Parliament Buildings between 10.00 and 10.38 on Tuesday 25 June 1991.

2. The Government Team noted that the media that morning had carried what appeared to be, in substance if not in detail, fairly accurate reports on the content of the position paper which the Unionists had presented the previous evening. The Government Team asked whether the Unionist representatives could explain how their proposals had come to appear in the media. The UDUP noted that an account had been given by Mr Kilfedder on BBC radio that morning and that the Party had complained to the BBC about the accuracy of the report. The UDUP noted that reports on a possible intensification of the process had developed over the weekend but that, so far as he was aware, no details had been disclosed by any member of the UDUP delegation. The UUP noted that it would be difficult to apportion blame to any one individual given the wide circulation of papers - it was not necessarily the case that the paper had been leaked by a member of the group which had produced it. The SDLP confirmed that they had heard a report on BBC radio that morning. As a result of this and other developments over the previous 24 hours, the mood in the party was now one of severe apprehension, coupled with a feeling that no serious business could be conducted in circumstances in which members of delegations were constantly giving interviews to the media.

3. The Government Team noted that no personal accusation was contained in raising the issue. However, the fact that details were known to the media shortly after they had been discussed flew in the face of commitments which had been given by members of all delegations and did not help the work of the process. While the

deliberations of the Business Committee were reasonably secure, relatively accurate information had been reflected in the media on a regular basis. The Government Team asked that their concern on this should be passed to respective delegates.

4. The UDUP noted that, in recent weeks, there had been an increase in detailed coverage of the process in the media. It was possible to minimise this, but only if all delegations agreed that no statements whatsoever should be given to the media and no press conferences held. The UDUP agreed with the SDLP view that substantive progress was jeopardised by continuing leakage to the media. The SDLP said that they supported the UDUP proposal for an end to discussions with the media and the Alliance Party confirmed their agreement with the thrust of the proposal. Following further discussion, it was agreed that the issue of advice against discussions with the media should cover papers as well as speech. It was noted that members of parties involved in the process who were not also delegation members might not feel bound by any agreement, and it was further agreed that party leaders should inform all prominent members of their respective parties of the proposal that no papers should be released to the media, that there should be no comment to the media and no briefing on the process. This arrangement was subject only to the caveat that if one group felt that its position had been prejudiced it could make an approach to the media if it first informed all other groups, in plenary session, of its intention to do so. It was agreed that the Business Committee would accordingly recommend that there shall be a renewed commitment to confidentiality.

Intensification

5. The SDLP asked for clarification of the Unionist position on continuing the process after 16 July and suggested that discussions should now take place on a work schedule up to that date. The Government Team noted that it was unlikely that the Unionist representatives on the Business Committee would be in a position to add anything to the explanation of their position as set out by the Unionist Party leaders on 24 June. The UDUP confirmed this while noting that their position was not one of a complete refusal to talk

at all - Dr Paisley intended to make a clarifying statement to this effect during the course of 25 June. The SDLP confirmed that they did not wish to make any capital out of the Unionist position and discussion at Business Committee should take care not to prejudice the Unionist leaders position. But the process should continue in such a form as to enable a conclusion to be reached.

6. After discussion, it was agreed that the Government Team should report to the plenary session that the Unionist representatives on the Business Committee had confirmed their understanding that the basis of what had been negotiated was that discussions would take place between two pre-specified dates between Anglo-Irish Conferences, and that, given this, the only certain time that was left to conduct the present process was that before 16 July.

7. Discussion then turned to the Unionist timetable set out in the position paper of 24 June. The UDUP confirmed that this did not represent a "take it or leave it" paper, but rather a proposal for discussion. The Alliance Party noted that they continued to have difficulties with an extension of working time in this week and that there were certain impracticalities about the Unionist paper. The Alliance Party had, therefore, overnight, drawn up their own proposals (NB: this was circulated at the meeting and is attached to this record as Annex A).

8. Expanding on the paper, the Alliance Party said that they believed that there serious difficulties and impracticalities in compressing the programme on the lines suggested by the Unionists. That said, they were anxious to work within the spirit of the Unionist proposals to continue the process and to reach agreement. Much could be achieved if the Unionist timetable were to be converted to a working programme based on the development of working groups. If this format were developed, it would enable the working day to be split into groups with the inference that not every delegate would be involved for every minute of the working day. An additional principle behind the Alliance Party paper was that there was no point in continuing the process only to arrive at a state of limbo. On the basis that "nothing was agreed until everything has been agreed" it was thought that there would be advantage in moving

the process on to Strand Two as part of the revised working programme. If this happened and if working groups were to be developed as suggested, then confidentiality became of crucial importance.

9. The UDUP said that the Alliance Party paper represented an extensive amount of overnight work but that, given the detail which it contained, there would be a need for discussion with colleagues. They would wish to reserve their judgment until such discussions had taken place. The UUP said that they were grateful for the work that the Alliance Party had put into the paper, while noting that it was even more radical than the proposition which had been forward by the joint Unionist delegation on the previous day. The SDLP also confirmed that they were not in a position to offer any detailed reaction to the paper and would wish to put it to their party. They did not accept the broad considerations which lead to a requirement for intensification but would be prepared to consider the position.

10. The Government Team then suggested that the paper required substantive work during the course of the day. It would not be appropriate to postpone consideration and the continuation of plenaries during the course of the day would not be compatible with consideration of the paper - on this basis, the Government Team proposed that it should be reported to the plenary session that the Business Committee suggested an adjournment of the plenary session until such time as the paper had been digested by the various delegations. This was agreed.

11. On a procedural point, the UDUP noted that the Alliance paper contained reference to Strand Two. Since Strand Two involved others than the Government Team and the four Northern Ireland Parties, was it possible to work out a timetable without involving the other party? The Government Team indicated that the first priority was to receive the views of parties on the Alliance Party paper and that points flowing from it could be dealt with at a later stage.

TALKS SECRETARIAT

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