



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

Reference Code:	2018/68/64
Creation Dates:	23 November 1988
Extent and medium:	3 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
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*McKusker
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Taoiseach
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I had a long discussion on Wednesday last (23 November) with Harold McCusker of the Official Unionist Party.

McCusker opened the conversation by asking if the Dublin position was that it wished to continue basing its policy on an inter-governmental relationship with the British or were we prepared to develop a relationship with the Unionist community. If we were prepared to develop such a relationship - and he accepted the sincerity of the Taoiseach's efforts to open up a dialogue with Unionism - the proposals which Molyneaux and Paisley had put to Tom King last January offered a possible and, in his view, realistic way forward. (These proposals were for a form of administrative devolution, involving an elected Assembly with a series of Committees - health, education, etc. - which would have paid Chairmen, selected on a proportionate basis. One of the Committees would have responsibility for External Relations - in effect relations with Dublin).

McCusker accepted that the Unionist proposals had not fired Tom King with enthusiasm but he believes that this may have been due in large part to the cautious and restrictive presentation of them by Molyneaux and Paisley. Both party leaders had to be pressurised into going along with the proposals and made little secret (internally) of the fact that they considered them to be too radical. This concern explained why the proposals had not yet been published, despite the view of a number of Unionists, such as McCusker, who believed that the best approach was to present and sell the proposals publicly.

In McCusker's view, the January proposals would amount to power-sharing plus an Irish dimension, given (a) that the Chairmen of Committees, though nominally responsible for autonomous areas, would in practice quickly begin to operate as an Executive, and (b) that the External Relations Committee would be mandated to develop relations with Dublin in a practical and positive way. He went on to say that some "totality of relationship dimension" would also be

acceptable as part of a package (he did not elaborate on his thinking on this aspect, but presumably meant some London-Dublin governmental link and perhaps also the proposed Inter-parliamentary Body), and he added that perhaps Unionists might also be able to sell "even a little more than this".

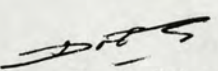
The difficulty at this stage for Unionists was to devise a formula on suspension of the Conference which would enable them to enter into dialogue. McCusker said that the Duisburg proposal of talks taking place between the end of one Conference and (the publicly announced) date of the next was a possible way forward, though some way of having the Heads of the Secretariat out of Maryfield, at least for a limited period, would also have to be found. He accepted that there were conflicting reports of what had been agreed at Duisburg and for this reason, and following a discussion with John Hume, he had asked Peter Robinson to put down on paper his understanding of the consensus. He would pass copies of this to Hume and to us.

McCusker was not optimistic about the possibility of agreement emerging from any talks but believed that the time was ripe to try to move things forward. The Unionist community were now much more pragmatic and realistic about their political position and did not want to see the existing vacuum continuing indefinitely. Paisley was no longer a dominant force and the Robinson, Dodds, Wilson wing of the DUP were in the ascendant, were prepared to adopt a pragmatic approach to negotiations and to the need for concessions and, above all, were "hungry for power". They, and Unionists generally, fully realised that the Taoiseach could not be politically expected to turn his back on the Anglo-Irish Agreement unless he was in a position to put "something better" in its place. The potential in all this was worth exploring but he wondered if Molyneaux had the courage to grasp the nettle.

McCusker went on to say that Molyneaux had seemed somewhat more prepared to have meetings with Dublin earlier in the year but

seemed to have been frightened off by the leaks of meetings emanating from Dublin. Interestingly, these leaks centred more on meetings with Opposition Leaders - it was widely rumoured in Belfast at the time, for example, that Molyneaux had been seen leaving Dick Spring's office - than with the Taoiseach. I emphasised that absolutely no leaks about any possible meeting had come from official sources and that on numerous occasions in the Dail the Taoiseach had refused, despite intense pressure, to give any information about his contacts with Unionist leaders. McCusker accepted this and said that very probably the leaks had emerged from opposition sources for internal political reasons. In this regard, he was particularly critical of the PDs who he said had all but claimed that they had met Jim Molyneaux.

Since we met, McCusker has welcomed Mrs. Thatcher's response to Paisley and Molyneaux's letter to her about the January Unionist proposals. In their letter, they had suggested that Tom King might not have shown the proposals to her. The Prime Minister replied that in fact the proposals had been passed to her and that she found them to be "constructive". She also referred to the fact that one of the stated obstacles to talks at the time, the SDLP/Sinn Féin meetings, had now ended. The Thatcher letter is a further indication of the increasing British desire to get talks (in Northern Ireland) off the ground at an early date.


Dermot Gallagher,
29 November, 1988.

P. S. McCusker, in a reference to the International Fund, said that he was astonished that Charlie Brett - someone with no credibility in either community - had been chosen as Chairman of the Fund. His prime interest was in obtaining a knighthood. This led him on to suggest that, whatever we did, we should not introduce an honours system here; on the Northern Ireland experience, the thousands of sycophants who would inevitably emerge from the woodwork would break the hearts of politicians on a daily basis.