

Can we not substitute another study group for the one on structures? That is the danger is one.

Prime Minister.

Ref: A04347

I am sure that the talks should be postponed. Agree?

SECRET AND PERSONAL

MR. ALEXANDER

Prime Minister

Agree - there can be postponed until next week.

I very much agree with Mr Alexander's advice.

July 2nd

Anglo-Irish Joint Studies early on Thursday afternoon. Agree?

At the suggestion of the Irish, it was agreed in mid-February that the first two meetings of Joint Study Groups (one on structures and one on security) should take place in Dublin on 6th March. Although none of the Irish and most of the British participants do not know it, this turns out to be the day the Prime Minister will be visiting Northern Ireland. We have considered with the Northern Ireland Office whether this coincidence matters and whether there is anything we should do about it.

2. It was announced a month ago that the studies had "just started" and were taking place in London and Dublin (Hansard 3rd February, col. 142). At that stage only the supervisory steering group had in fact met (in London on 30th January). After the first two Study Groups meet on 6th March the other three Study Groups are to have their first meetings on 10th-11th March, also in Dublin. Neither side will be publicly revealing the precise timetable for these meetings. Experience so far suggests that they are unlikely to leak by accident, but the possibility cannot be excluded. If there were to be questions, e.g. because some official's presence on an aeroplane to Dublin were noticed by a journalist, we should have to say that, as announced, the Studies are under way and involve meetings which take place sometimes in London and sometimes in Dublin, that we cannot give any further details, and that it is pure coincidence that the 6th March was chosen (before the date of the Prime Minister's visit was known) as the date for one of these meetings.

3. If no leak occurs, the coincidence of events on 6th March will not become known - except to the Irish Government to whom we can readily explain that it is coincidence. If there is a leak, the present highly-charged atmosphere in Northern Ireland would no doubt enable Dr. Paisley to make some emotional and rhetorical play with the fact that, at the very moment when the Prime Minister was in Northern Ireland seeking to give personal reassurance to the Province, her minions were in Dublin plotting the betrayal



SECRET AND PERSONAL

of the North. He could of course make virtually the same point if the Dublin meetings took place a few days earlier or later, and leaked: the real crime in Paisleyite eyes is that the Studies are taking place at all.

4. The question is whether the coincidence - or the use that Dr. Paisley might make of it - would create sufficiently extra damage to warrant our trying to alter the 6th March meetings in Dublin at this notice. The risk of a leak is not very great: the party going to Dublin does not include any obviously identifiable officials. It would be very awkward to postpone the meetings now: the Irish would feel messed about and the atmosphere of the Studies might be soured. The fact that we had postponed might itself leak, and give rise to erroneous conclusions. The NIO agree that we should let the meetings go ahead. On all rational grounds I am sure that they are right; but we are not dealing with rational people or a rational situation, and I can see Dr. Paisley making some very effective debating points about the Prime Minister's perfidy and double-tonguedness: simultaneously offering soft soap to The Queen's loyal subjects in Belfast with one hand and a surreptitious sell-out to the enemy in Dublin with the other.

5. If the Prime Minister thinks that we ought not to take the risk, however small it may be, and should therefore postpone the meetings in Dublin, I think that in order to minimise the risk of damage we should ask Her Majesty's Ambassador to explain privately and under the seal of total confidence, to Mr. Haughey why we are asking for a postponement. This would involve extending at least to the British Ambassador in Dublin and to Mr. Haughey advance knowledge of the Prime Minister's visit to Belfast, and thus some additional security risk, however slight. But it is in Mr. Haughey's interest as well as ours to preserve good relations and not to wreck the Studies: I believe he would both understand the reasons for postponement and respect the confidence.

(Robert Armstrong)

(approved by Sir R. Armstrong and signed on his behalf).

2nd March 1981