

**Memo** - stalemate.  
20 November 1996

David,

Following our meetings yesterday with HMG, SDLP and UDP it is clear that there is little or no likelihood of a breakthrough on this issue in the near future. The government and the SDLP are continuing to play hardball with us, using the line that they can't sell our proposals to the nationalists. The comments of David Hill were particularly significant in that he was trying to tease out a response as to whether we would be happy to debate the decommissioning issue with Sinn Fein in plenary before allowing them into substantives. It is my opinion that they are trying to strike a deal with Sinn Fein that if they declare some form of ceasefire, then the UUP will accept them into a plenary session where decommissioning can be debated before substantive talks begin. Frankly, this will leave us in a very dangerous position. Even though our 15 October submission on decommissioning expresses our desire to effectively see the 'car built' before Sinn Fein even get into our envisaged sanitising process, I see precious little notice being taken of it by HMG. They are pushing for a compromise position and they will do anything to encourage the provos to come in.

I was not present at the SDLP meeting, but I gather it was merely a continuation of Farren's questioning and clarification sessions.

The UDP meeting was tense. They are convinced that we have hardened up our position specifically to ensure Sinn Fein's exclusion. No matter how much Reg tried to explain that our provisions viz. 12 November set out the entry requirements Sinn Fein must meet, McMichael was convinced they were designed purely to exclude Sinn Fein. Joe English and David Adams both emphasised the fragility of the loyalist ceasefire and both claimed that the UUP, by insisting on prior decommissioning, would inevitably provoke more republican violence. They are adamant that we will be to blame for a return to war because of our decommissioning demands which they allege 'we know' the provos will never accept.

Assessing all the meetings over the past week or so, it is clear all the parties (barring UKUP & DUP) are doing everything they can to force us into a climbdown on this issue. At the moment it looks like that is what it will take to avert collapse. I don't think so. There is no problem with us exploring this issue for another two weeks at least with the SDLP, during which time we can continue to build and modify the structures and mechanisms we need in place. We must realise that this work will have to be done at some stage in the process anyway. As Reg correctly says, we probably can reach agreement on *certain* mechanisms and roles for a commission, and liaison committee with the SDLP. But crucially, there will be no breakthrough on prior decommissioning and entry requirements. Therefore we must face up to where it is we want the Talks to go. Do we want them to go forward with a fudge, or do we want them put on ice until the elections are over? It is time we dictated the pace and agenda for a change.

DWK.