

Memo- suspend.

14 November 1996

David,

At present we are now faced with three options if we are going to seriously decide on a strategy which everyone can either follow or at least understand,

Option 1

We can devise a joint approach on decommissioning with McCartney and the DUP which will ultimately afford us the security of keeping our own people on side, whilst not having to worry about the recriminations of being the weak link in the chain etc.

The Talks will collapse, and there will almost certainly be a breakdown of the loyalist ceasefire following the next anticipated IRA strike. (It is my firm opinion following bi-laterals today with PUP and UDP that the loyalists have been actively preparing for a full scale resumption of violence over the past few weeks, and are now fully prepared for this eventuality.)

In any case should violence follow the collapsed Talks process, the Provo ratchet will continue to tighten, as they lever for more concessions, leaving us conceivably in a worse position three or four years down the line in a new process.

Option 2

We can work to find an accommodation with the SDLP and Alliance on how decommissioning can be dealt with via some form of sub/liaison committee which will work with the core independent commission whilst we move into substantive talks. The SDLP will block any attempt by us to have everything set up in terms of mechanisms, independent commission proper, (with terms of reference), and a liaison committee with only reporting duties to plenary. We can identify this as blackmail or whatever, but fundamentally they and the Irish government hold the key to break the deadlock. They will agree to nothing that will copper fasten Sinn Fein's exclusion. Our problem is however, that this is not what will be the broad perception should we fail to reach a deal with them.

In any event whilst the Talks may survive, the DUP and McCartney will leave alleging we have broken rank once again, betraying the pro-union people and siding with terrorists. This will cause us grave electoral damage in April or May. Our problem in this respect lies not with the DUP, but rather with McCartney. His capacity to articulate and orchestrate attacks upon you and the Party in the Newsletter and Telegraph are damaging us. Irrespective of how we feel or indeed whether we retaliate, public perception will still be influenced. And in these circumstances (pre-election season) I am firmly convinced McCartney's sharpening up of DUP vitriol, will affect our support.

Summarised, I feel the striking of a deal with the SDLP at this stage, weakening our demands per 15 October and November 12 1996, could conceivably threaten our majority vote. Added to this is the likelihood we could be sitting at a table with Sinn Fein when it is possible the IRA could detonate a privatised explosion under the guise of the CAC. (And note Mayhew's comments yesterday when he said if SF were in they would have to do something 'very serious' to be thrown out).

Option 3

We take the only safe option available to us, and we play for time for another two to three weeks debating decommissioning with negligible progress, and we request the Talks be put on hold until the elections are concluded (our blurb 'as the obvious election mode everyone has now adopted in going to prevent any progress anyway'.)

The Talks building will remain open for any bi-laterals parties wish to have, and the Forum will continue to meet in order to give the impression that political dialogue is continuing between the Northern Ireland parties in an elected body. The Forum will require the participation of the SDLP (a spin we could publicly use to screen the suspension of the Talks). We can emphasise the need to address the issue of parades in advance of next year's Marching season, and the need to discuss other issues relevant to the Talks process without any Party having to commit itself to a definitive agreement. Indeed if properly managed we could substitute the Forum for the Talks in the interim period, something we have wanted to do all along, and in we could posture and electioneer all we like.

Ultimately however, we will have to face facts. We cannot expect to win any friends for siding with McCartney and Paisley in collapsing the Talks, and plunging the province back into violence. Alternatively, we cannot risk the electoral damage and the damage to your own position if we were to strike yet another deal with nationalism, possibly giving Sinn Fein the green light to come in, on such sensitive issue to our people. Our only realistic option therefore is to set out our stall to have the Talks parked for a few months, so as to allow room for real progress to take place after the elections, whilst debate can continue in the Forum maintaining a focal point for public interest.

We all value your leadership, the Party and this process too much to see it fall now because of our inability to be able to do business in the run up to elections. The sensible option therefore is to give the process the opportunity to succeed, in circumstances where it's likely it will. Whether or not this interim period will be tainted by violence remains to be seen. It is likely if violence does occur, it would do so with or without substantive negotiations taking place anyway. However, we can be sure that Sinn Fein will be keen to keep a clean profile for the majority of the time in their bid to net a large peace-vote yet again. As a Party meanwhile, we can only hold fast to our beliefs that progress will only ever be made (to use Hume-speak) 'in an atmosphere totally free from...' elections.