

23 February 1998

STRAND THREE LIAISON MINUTES

Attached are Strand Three minutes of previous meeting in Lancaster House, London.

Joint Government Notetakers

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From: Joint Government Notetakers
23 February 1998

**SUMMARY RECORD OF STRAND THREE MEETING -
WEDNESDAY 28 JANUARY 1998 AT 1230 -
LANCASTER HOUSE, LONDON**

CHAIRMEN: British Government
Irish Government

THOSE PRESENT: Alliance
Labour
Northern Ireland Women's Coalition
Progressive Unionist Party
Sinn Féin
Social Democratic and Labour Party
Ulster Unionist Party

1. The British Government opened the meeting by introducing the joint discussion paper on Strand Three, circulated to participants by the two Governments the previous day, and suggested an outline format to the session. The British Government went on to outline the broad characteristics of the joint paper; the opportunities for co-operation with devolved administration in Scotland and Wales, the independent operation of both the Intergovernmental Council and the North/South Ministerial Council and a consultative role for representatives of a new Northern Ireland administration in the standing intergovernmental conference's consideration of non devolved matters. Finally it proposed that participants consider responding to the questions in the paper either initially now or in writing at a later stage as had been asked of them in Strand Two.

2. The Irish Government said that each of the three strands were important. It similarly outlined the broad characteristics of the joint paper pointing out that the standing intergovernmental conference would represent the continuing institutional expression of the Irish Government's recognised concern and role in relation to Northern Ireland. The Joint Paper made clear that the two Governments remained committed to the positions set out in the Joint Declaration and the Frameworks Document.

3. Alliance proposed that consultation on the intergovernmental conference include Scotland and Wales. It believed there was scope for co-operation within these islands, and instanced the example of the Nordic Council. The Council should be democratically accountable and operate on a consensual basis. The party disputed the need for Strand Three to operate as a review mechanism for an overall settlement. It was pleased that representatives of a Northern Ireland administration would be involved in the deliberations of the intergovernmental council, and it looked forward to the development of inter-parliamentary co-operation, noting that this was less a matter for Governments than for the parliamentarians themselves. It would respond fully in writing.

4. Labour said it was in general agreement with paragraphs 39-49 of the Framework Document. It said the key function of the intergovernmental conference would be to keep an agreement under review and to ensure its efficient operation. It would respond fully in writing.

5. The NIWC said Strand Three should address the wider aspects of co-operation within these islands, which it envisaged should be widely defined, and perform a monitoring role for an agreement. The party proposed a duty of service requirement in respect of Strand Three arrangements which should be open and transparent. It noted that there would need to be a transition period during which an agreement was

implemented to allow for adjustments as necessary. It also looked forward to an expansion of parliamentary co-operation along the lines of the British Irish Inter-parliamentary Body and would respond to further points in writing.

6. The PUP was critical of what it termed a 'grievance culture' in nationalism, and said there was need for a healing process involving people in both islands. Strand Three would provide an appropriate field in which this could occur against a backdrop of developing co-operation. It recognised a dynamic change in the Republic, but raised the possibility of removal rather than amendment of Articles Two and Three, along with a statement of no selfish interest in the future of Northern Ireland. It would respond fully in writing.

7. Sinn Féin said it believed new arrangements should, in the best interests of all the people of Ireland, aim to advance a process of national reconciliation and unity, underpin political democracy and recognise fully the diversity as well as the unity of the people of Ireland. It saw the development of an entirely new relationship between the people of Ireland and the people of Wales, Scotland and England, based on independence, mutual respect and co-operation. As part of this transition new structures needed to be developed which created a bridge into the future. The party was prepared to consider that an intergovernmental structure could play such a transitional role allowing the Irish Government to institutionally and directly represent the interests and aspirations of nationalists living in the north of Ireland. In the longer term it wished to see the fuller development of a new relationship between the peoples of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales.

8. The SDLP confirmed its intention to provide written responses to the questions raised by both Governments. The party said it wished to suggest the word "custodians" in relation to the role and responsibilities of the two Governments in ensuring that the concept of an intergovernmental Council succeeded. Furthermore those "custodians"

could ensure that the concept didn't become one of great excitement followed by neglect in the transitional period between the present process reaching agreement and a Council being created. It said it had no problem with an intergovernmental Council or a Council of the Isles. There was potential in it and it could be an exciting experiment with both political advantages and disadvantages. It was, however, of paramount importance that no such intergovernmental machinery would supersede or subsume any North/South structures. The party raised a practical point in relation to meetings of the Inter Parliamentary Body and clashes of dates with the Talks Process. It hoped that both Governments could ensure that future difficulties in this area be minimised. Summing up the party said the intergovernmental Council would create a new dimension, light up the political landscape and provide an opportunity to start and create a new future, through an imaginative structure, thereby developing a role model for the rest of the world. Conversely it might also end up being a talking shop therefore the "custodians" had to ensure this didn't happen.

9. The UUP confirmed that it would respond in writing to the Governments questions since they were wide ranging and required careful consideration. The party, referring to earlier British Government remarks, said it was content for its paper on a Council of the Isles to be circulated to all participants. It also proposed that a detailed paper on East/West contact and co-operation, published by the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister in December be made available to the parties. The party viewed Strand Three as important and Strand Two and Three as being inextricably linked. It wanted to see appropriate structures built to reflect this linkage and believed the concept of a Council of the Isles was the proper context in which both co-operation and the totality of relationships could be addressed. The party referred to the East/West relationship as being as important, if not more so, than North/South links. Greater numbers of people in Northern Ireland looked to Scotland rather than Dublin so issues of mutual concern where co-operation was appropriate had to be considered in both East/West and North/South perspectives. There was also a wide range of issues on

which co-operation was required which were set in the British Isles context and therefore some structure was required to address this need and provide co-operation. The party was also sceptical of any body which had an overseeing role. Trust and confidence needed to be built up but such a monitoring role, if implemented, would not help achieve this. It wanted to see co-operation set within the context of acceptable constitutional arrangements within the Irish Republic but at present Articles two and three prevented such co-operation from taking place. The party referred to Alliance's comments concerning the Nordic Council and said such a model might be more appropriate to study than the European Union's Council of Ministers. Given this it would circulate a paper to other participants in due course which might provide information on a number of models other than the Council of Ministers.

10. The British Government thanked all participants, agreed with the UUP that the papers highlighted should be circulated and looked forward to the party's paper on other models. The British Government confirmed that it wished to have participants' written responses to the questions by 6 February. It was agreed that these could be circulated to other parties. Following this the joint Chair would produce a synthesis of that input to enable a further Strand Three session to occur in Dublin. Alliance briefly raised the need to consult with colleagues in Scotland and Wales on the Council of the Isles concept since time was moving on. The British Government agreed to contact other Government colleagues and return with some further ideas for the next meeting. The meeting adjourned at 1315.

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