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B/S

From: Keith Jagelman
19 July 1996

POLITICAL AFFAIR
DIVISION

19 JUL 1996

N.I.O. BELFAST

DESK IMMEDIATE

J. McKERRILL
P. SMYTH
J. BLACK
A. McVEIGH

cc: PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Sir David Fell - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Maccabe - B
Mr Lavery - B
Mr Carson - B
Mrs Brown - B
Mr D J R Hill (B&L) - B

PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B

REQUEST FOR MEETING WITH THE SECRETARY OF STATE BY WOMEN'S COALITION

1. Your two notes of today's date to Mr Carson sought urgent advice on the request by Bronagh Hinds of the Women's Coalition for an urgent meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss concerns about the status of the rules of procedure in the Forum in the context of the legislation. The purpose of this note is to provide advice on an interim response to Ms Hinds.

Background

2. This request arises from today's Forum meeting which agreed on a set of rules of procedure to be forwarded to the Secretary of State for approval. Ms McWilliams of the Women's Coalition voted against the motion that the rules should be sent to the Secretary of State on the basis that in the absence of the SDLP from the Forum the Secretary of State could not carry out his statutory duty under schedule 2 paragraph 3(4) of the legislation. The Women's Coalition is anxious to meet with the Secretary of State before he considers the rules as adopted by the Forum.

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3. In practice, it is unlikely that the Secretary of State will receive the rules from the Forum Chairman before the middle of next week. The legislation requires that the Secretary of State 'shall make every effort to secure that the rules of procedure of the Forum facilitate the promotion of dialogue, understanding and consensus, across the communities of Northern Ireland.' Approval of the rules on this basis is entirely at the discretion of the Secretary of State, and is not dependant upon the rules having obtained cross-community support at the Forum. Clearly the Secretary of State will wish to consider the rules as presented to him by the Forum before determining whether in his view the terms of the legislation have been met. The urgency for a meeting is therefore rather less than the Women's Coalition have implied.

Recommendations

4. Given access to the Secretary of State enjoyed by other local parties in recent days, it is recommended that the Secretary of State accede to Ms Hinds' request for a meeting, but only after he has had an opportunity to consider the rules as passed by the Forum. If approached by members of the Coalition on Monday morning, the Secretary of State may wish to respond in these terms, while seeking to reassure the Party that he will take no decisions on the rules of procedure prior to any such meeting taking place. More detailed briefing will be provided when a meeting has been arranged.

(SIGNED)

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