

256/1

22

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To: HQ

From: Belfast

For: Second Secretary O hUiginn

From: Joint Secretary

COPY TO:
PST
PSS
MR. P. TEAHON
MR. S. DONLON
MR. T. DALTON

Subj: Position of SDLP on elections and forum

1. In preparation for this afternoon's meeting in Dublin, I have given the British side a preliminary account of the meeting which the Tanaiste had yesterday with the SDLP, based on our phone conversation, and have promised a fuller account later today.
2. I have drawn attention to the stark contrast between the SDLP's presentation to us and the British account of a "good-humoured, light-hearted and constructive meeting" with the Secretary of State on Tuesday which supposedly revealed some softening in the SDLP's position.
3. Peter Bell, who took part in a discussion with Ministers this morning, confessed to being surprised at the account which had been passed to us yesterday (in his absence). Its upbeat tone was at odds with the series of meetings which the Secretary of State has had with the SDLP in recent weeks, "one gloomier than another". It was also contradicted by reports from Baroness Denton, who is in New York this week, of angry condemnations by John Hume of the British Government's position on elections and a forum.
4. I have also drawn attention to the reports in today's Financial Times and Independent which suggest that the British Government has already finalised its position on the form of an election and other matters. Given that the Tanaiste is supposed to be meeting the Secretary of State this afternoon for an initial review of the position reached at the end of the consultation period, and given that contact between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister will also be required, it is startling to find signals being given to the British media today that the dye is already cast and that some of the relevant decisions have already been taken. I recalled the assurance given to me

256/2

earlier this week (by Jonathan Stephens in Bell's absence) that British Ministers would not be reaching any decisions this week and that in any event no final decisions could or would be taken until the matters in question had been considered by the full Cabinet.

5. In response, Bell confirmed that no decisions have been taken and said that Ministers at this morning's meeting dismissed these reports as "tea-room gossip". Apart from the meeting with the Tanaiste this afternoon, he considered it inconceivable that the Prime Minister could take any decisions in advance of consultation with the Taoiseach. Furthermore, given their highly sensitive nature, it was unlikely that these decisions would be taken until "the last possible moment" - which, Bell judged, would be well into next week.
6. As to the choices to be made, Bell mentioned a comment by the Secretary of State to the effect that, whatever course was followed, somebody would be offended and no option was cost-free. In practical terms, a calculation had to be made about the one likeliest to cause least damage to the process.
7. I noted that, according to the briefing provided today on the UUP's most recent meeting with the Secretary of State, the UUP were not threatening a boycott in the event of a list system being chosen. British Ministers, we presumed, would in any event take a dim view of a boycott threat by the party which had demanded an election in the first place. The fact that a clear majority of the parties favoured a list system was a further and substantial reason for the British Government to opt in that direction.
8. I also emphasised the enormity of the step taken by the nationalist parties in agreeing to an election at all; the minimum reciprocation should be that the election would take place on the basis which they were proposing. An already extremely difficult situation for nationalists was being compounded by the proposals which the British Government were putting forward in relation to the elected forum. The Tanaiste had signalled these problems in the clearest terms last Friday and they had been forcefully reiterated to him when the SDLP met him yesterday. The reports in today's papers would serve merely to deepen the SDLP's worst fears.
9. Bell undertook to relay these points in advance of this afternoon's meeting.