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Date: 5 September, 1996

cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L)  
PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L)  
PS/Michael Ancram (B&L)  
PS/PUS (B&L)  
PS/Sir David Fell  
Mr Legge  
Mr Thomas (B&L)  
Mr Bell  
Mr Leach (B&L)  
Mr Steele  
Mr Watkins  
Mr Wood (B&L)  
Mr Perry  
Mr Hill (B&L)  
Mr Lavery  
Mr Maccabe  
Mr Stephens  
Mrs McNally  
Mr Clarke, Dublin  
Mr Lamont RID, FCO

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

TALKS: MEETING WITH THE SDLP, 4 SEPTEMBER

Summary

1. A constructive, unfocused, meeting. SDLP less pessimistic than before the summer, anxious to press on with talks, but anxious they should deliver quickly, for fear of the drift of nationalist opinion to Sinn Féin.

Detail

2. Michael Ancram met Mr Hume and Mr Mallon yesterday evening to discuss resumption of the talks. On our side were Mr Watkins, Mr Hill, Mr Maccabe and me. Mr Mallon looked better, and took a more positive approach, than in July; Mr Hume positive too, but seemed at times seemed slightly distracted.

3. Michael Ancram began with a reaffirmation of our commitment to the talks process; its collapse would leave a dangerous void. Mr Hume and Mr Mallon said they had made the same point strongly to the Irish: the alternative was street politics. But, Mr Hume said, it was important to move to the real issues quickly (those he characterised as 'agreeing institutions for Northern Ireland', and 'relationships with the South: one of several references that struck us as a rather more unionist-friendly formulations than usual).

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4. Mr Mallon acknowledged that attitudes had hardened, and willingness to compromise reduced, on both sides. But particularly so among nationalists; there was a strong feeling that talks were going nowhere; Mr Hume spoke of much-increased middle-class support for Sinn Féin.

5. Mr Mallon said the events of the summer meant that the SDLP had a much shorter time to show their community the talks could produce a settlement. Mr Hume suggested a time-frame of six months to resolve matters. Michael Ancram floated, informally, the idea of a review of talks progress by the participants at some point, to seek to move issues forward.

6. Michael Ancram said it appeared that on all sides participants had to convince each other that they were serious about the talks. There were strong unionist concerns. One was the perennial fear of the slippery slope to a united Ireland. Mr Hume said the Unionists always believed he had something up his sleeve. They should realise on the contrary how much matters had moved their way: they would certainly not, for example, have had ten years ago SDLP agreement to the proposition that any settlement had to be approved by a vote within Northern Ireland. He mentioned the meeting with the UUP today.

7. On decommissioning, Michael Ancram outlined unionist fears that the issue would be perpetually dodged. They needed substantiation of the Mitchell scheme; confidence had to be built on both sides. They had come a long way on this; he drew attention to Mr Taylor's statement before the summer endorsing 'partial decommissioning on a mutual basis'. Mr Hume thought decommissioning a non-issue: paramilitaries could give up arms one day and re-equip the next. Mr Mallon was content to see the appointment of a sub-committee; but wished to avoid the making of regular reports back to plenary which, since guns could not be got off people, would endlessly catalogue failure.

8. On the comprehensive agenda, Mr Mallon was anxious for discussion to be as brief as possible. He was content with the 'broad headings' approach, and for example, the substitution of 'constitutional issues' for anything that opened Unionists to allegations of 'negotiating the Union'. The simpler the better: Mr Hume indeed went further and suggested bare headings based on existing text, such as 'relationships within Northern Ireland and their institutional expression' for Strand One. There was no demur when Michael Ancram suggested the comprehensive agenda might be considered in the Business Committee.

9. Mr Mallon said the first week of talks would be very important. In the interests of getting to the real issues, might there be a gentleman's agreement to avoid opening statements altogether? (It was not clear he intended the consequence that the talks would restart with the address to decommissioning).

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10. He was much concerned about the position of the loyalist parties. The affair could finish the talks, and show that the political process was not capable of solving Northern Ireland's problems. Michael Ancram outlined as he had to the UUP rule 29, and the necessity for it to be operated fairly. Mr Mallon hoped the issue could be kept out of the talks until later, when representations had been received.

11. Mr Hume and Mr Mallon both hoped the talks could be made to operate more briskly and effectively. Might the Governments not urge the Chairman to tighten proceedings up, to avoid interminable debate? Michael Ancram spoke of the difficult position Senator Mitchell had been in before the sufficient consensus rules had been endorsed. Mr Mallon suggested that in large gatherings, such as we had before the summer, Unionist speakers were anxious to play to the gallery; a reduced format would be much better. But it must be a rule that participants were able to commit their parties in such formats if they were to be effective; the SDLP had been bruised by agreements reached with the UUP and later disavowed by Mr Trimble.

12. Michael Ancram mentioned that it might be necessary to contact Mr Hume and Mr Mallon over the weekend. Both are likely to be at home (Mr Mallon skipping BIA to prepare for talks, Mr Hume apparently unaware it was happening).

Signed

A J Whysall

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