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From: Peter Westmacott

Date: 19 July 1996

cc: PS/Sir P Mayhew
PS/Michael Ancram
PS/Foreign and
Commonwealth Secretary
Mr Stephens, NIO(L)
HM Ambassador, Dublin
Mr Holmes, No 10
PS
Mr McDonald

File
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29/7.

NOTE FOR FILE

NORTHERN IRELAND: SENATOR MITCHELL

1. Martha Pope, Mitchell's Chief of Staff, telephoned this morning from Belfast for a private talk (please protect).
2. Pope said that the talks were on life support. She thought that Mitchell had been right to return from the US on Tuesday talking tough about the need for the parties to move beyond procedure to substance. She had been surprised by his willingness to accept the UUP's idea of "an interim document" (presumably the Key Paragraphs paper) as a half way house to agreement on Ground Rules as a whole, but drew my attention to Mitchell's warning to the party leaders that there would not be an agreement on the Rules of Procedure and agenda unless they wanted one and worked for it. Mitchell's instinct had been against holding a plenary session before 29 July, on the grounds that there wouldn't be enough agreement by then. He had acquiesced on our proposal of a plenary on 22 July, as a means of injecting new life into the process, but it was far from clear that the two governments, and the parties, would be ready by then. Mitchell was concerned to avoid the process becoming a laughing stock.
3. Pope said she feared that London and Dublin had different ideas of what might be deliverable next week. The British seemed to think that agreement on procedure and agenda was as much as could be achieved, while the Irish government seemed to be "more ambitious" - to judge from the calls which Pope had received from British and Irish officials after the IGC on 18 July. She was particularly concerned that the Irish might have underestimated the difficulty which the SDLP would have in

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agreeing an agenda which had 'discussion of decommissioning' at the top of, or even high on, the agenda. Even if they could accept that, there was a severe danger that the plenary would become bogged down on a discussion of nothing but decommissioning, with serious consequences for the atmosphere in which the parties would go into the summer recess (with the Apprentice Boys parading on 10 August). Seamus Mallon (SDLP) had told her that his meeting with the Irish government on 18 July had been "awful"; his constituents were already making it plain that they would rather be represented by a member of Sinn Fein. Pope felt that, in their enthusiasm to take account of the "rehabilitation" of SF, the Irish seemed to be riding roughshod over SDLP sensitivities.

4. We had a brief discussion of the White House's idea of establishing some kind of new dialogue with Sinn Fein. Pope reiterated her opposition to the idea of Mitchell conducting proximity talks. There would be obvious damage to his impartiality and to his relations with the Unionists. (Comment: as I have reported separately, the White House have now grasped this point.) Moreover, any attempt to reach out to Sinn Fein raised the question of how to reward the Loyalists for their restraint. There had to be a price for Sinn Fein failing to restore the cease-fire, after getting Mitchell and so many of their other demands met by the British and Irish governments. Pope acknowledged, nonetheless, that it was right to think through the options for keeping the peace process alive - and, above all, for avoiding a break for the summer which left the paramilitaries with no incentive to refrain from returning to violence.

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