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FROM: D J R HILL  
POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT TEAM  
9 September 1996



PS/Secretary of State (L&B)

cc

PS/Michael Ancram (L&B)  
PS/PUS (L&B)  
PS/Sir David Fell  
Mr Leach (B)  
Mr Bell  
Mr Watkins  
Mr Steele  
Mr Wood (L&B)  
Mr Stephens  
Mr Maccabe  
Mr Lavery  
Mr Beeton  
Mr Currie  
Mr Whysall (L&B)  
Ms Mapstone  
Ms Bharucha  
Mr Campbell Bannerman  
Mr Lamont, RID  
HMA, Dublin  
Mr Clarke, Dublin  
Ms Collins, Cabinet Office

*21 Sept 1996*

TALKS: DEBATE ON THE AGENDA FOR THE REST OF THE OPENING PLENARY

1. HMG's opening position in any discussion of the agenda for the rest of the opening plenary should be to explain and seek support for the draft agenda tabled by the two Governments on 30 July. However, Ministers could take the opportunity to

- underline the need for rapid progress in the Talks;
- set out their views on the main elements of the agenda (in a way which prepares the ground for something on the lines of the "proposal" attached to my submission of 5 September);
- signal that HMG is entirely ready to consider alternatives to the 30 July draft.

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2. I attach a possible draft speaking note on these lines, which could be deployed in any plenary debate on the plenary agenda, or drawn upon in any bilaterals.

3. It does not hark back to the agenda attached to the Possible Scenario of 6 June or make anything of the dropping of the original proposal that Senator Mitchell should report on the commitment of the participants to the Mitchell approach on decommissioning. There seems no point in reminding the Unionists of all this, though we might be able to extract some credit in passing for our current enlightened approach.

(Signed)

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DISCUSSION OF THE AGENDA FOR THE REST OF THE OPENING PLENARY

Draft Speaking Note

1. I am grateful for the opportunity to say something about the ground which needs to be covered in the rest of the opening plenary and how we might decide to go about it.
2. I should like to begin by making an important preliminary point. It does seem to me that there is clear need for us to make rapid substantive progress in these Talks. The people of Northern Ireland need a clear lead, a positive demonstration that constitutional political activity can lead towards a resolution of the causes of political instability in Northern Ireland. In the absence of any such demonstration, disenchantment with conventional politics could deepen. Tolerance for, or even support for and involvement in, non-constitutional action and the use or threat of violence could grow. None of us round this table is unaware of the dangers which that could bring.
3. We also need to take account of the approach of the UK general election. I quite understand that it will be difficult for party delegations to negotiate boldly and effectively in the immediate run up to an election.
4. On both grounds, therefore, we have a narrow window of opportunity before us. It will be in all our interests to make demonstrable progress in the next few weeks and the British Government is determined to facilitate and encourage such progress to the best of its ability. I suggest, Mr Chairman, that whatever happens we should hold a collective review of the situation in mid November with a view to assessing what progress has been made and what the prospects are for making further progress before the end of the year.
5. We will be inviting the Business Committee to factor this proposal into its consideration of how the Talks timetable should be structured in the coming weeks.



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As to the agenda for the rest of the opening plenary, it may be helpful to summarize the issues which the opening plenary must still deal with and identify those which, while desirable and appropriate, are nonetheless optional.

7. It is a requirement of the 28 February communiqué, following the Summit meeting between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, that after securing participants' commitment to the International Body's principles of democracy and non-violence the opening plenary session of these Talks should address the International Body's processes of democratization. The communiqué also made clear that at the same time the participants should have reassurance that a balanced and inclusive process of negotiation is continuing being offered to address the legitimate concerns of their respective communities, and the need for new political arrangements with which all can identify. That latter requirement has already been demonstrated in part by the adoption of fair, balanced and comprehensive rules of procedure for these negotiations; it would be further demonstrated by agreement on a comprehensive agenda, as provided for in Rule 17 of our rules of procedure.

8. These are the two substantive issues which this opening plenary has to deal with.

9. It has been suggested that it would be helpful to provide a context and background for this work by giving delegations the opportunity to make introductory remarks setting out their positions on the key issues and their overall approach to the negotiations. I continue to see some advantage in that but it could be dispensed with if that were the general view. There will be plenty of further opportunities during the negotiations for each delegation to set out its position on all the issues which arise.

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6. As to the agenda for the rest of the opening plenary, it may be helpful to summarise the issues which the opening plenary must still deal with and identify those which, while desirable and appropriate, are nonetheless optional.
7. It is a requirement of the 28 February communique, following the Summit meeting between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach, that after securing participants' commitment to the International Body's principles of democracy and non-violence the opening plenary session of these Talks should address the International Body's proposals on decommissioning. The communique also made clear that at the same stage the participants should have reassurance that a meaningful and inclusive process of negotiation is genuinely being offered to address the legitimate concerns of their respective communities, and the need for new political arrangements with which all can identify. That latter requirement has already been demonstrated in part by the adoption of fair, balanced and comprehensive rules of procedure for these negotiations; it would be further demonstrated by agreement on a comprehensive agenda, as provided for in Rule 17 of our rules of procedure.
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10. Other possible items on the agenda, such as the initiation of the three strands and the establishment of any mechanism which may be necessary to facilitate delegations' ongoing interest and involvement in achieving progress on decommissioning are purely procedural. I believe we are all agreed that you, Mr Chairman, should have an opportunity to make some concluding remarks before the plenary ends.
11. That is the background to the draft agenda tabled by the British and Irish Governments on 30 July. There had previously been a measure of agreement that any opening statements might sensibly be made as the first business after the summer recess and the draft agenda maintains that position. I do not feel at all strongly on this point but it may help colleagues if I briefly set out the benefits which might conceivably arise.
12. As I see it, an opportunity to make general statements could provide a helpful introduction to our consideration of the International Body's proposals on decommissioning and, in particular, to the preparation of a comprehensive agenda. The process of delivering and listening to such statements could help to focus our attention on the substantive issues we need to address, and may well reveal encouraging signs of potential convergence. If made at an early stage they could give us all the time and opportunity to settle down and re-acustom ourselves to working together. If the opening statements were published - and the British Government would certainly intend to publish its contribution - they could provide a focus for positive reporting and analysis. We might usefully consider instituting a round of clarificatory questioning on any general statements to ensure there is no misunderstanding of any one's position. An important foundation for subsequent negotiations. Such clarificatory questioning was highly beneficial during the 1991 and 1992 Talks.

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13. I shall be interested to hear others' views on whether there should be an opportunity for introductory remarks on these lines.
14. Of the two substantive issues, there did seem to be a measure of agreement before the summer that the drawing up of the comprehensive agenda could usefully be remitted to a smaller group or groups, perhaps building on written suggestions from delegations. The British Government would be prepared to see the issue handled in that way if others were content.
15. That leaves the address to the International Body's proposals on decommissioning. This is a significant and weighty issue on which views are likely to be both strongly held and some way apart. I hope we can get into the necessary discussion so that we can develop greater mutual understanding on this key subject and work towards some agreed conclusions. The British Government has no particular preference as to whether the debate should take place in plenary or in a smaller working group: I look forward to hearing others' views on that point too.
16. Against that general background I commend the draft agenda of 30 July, tabled by the two Governments, and look forward to hearing other delegations' comments and suggestions.

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