FROM: D J R HILL
CPL DIVISION
8 AUGUST 1996

cc: PS/Michael Ancram (L&B) -B
PS/Sir John Wheeler (L&B) -B
PS/PUS (L&B) -B
PS/Sir David Fell -B
Mr Legge -B
Mr Thomas -B
Mr Bell -B
Mr Leach -B
Mr Ray -B
Mr Steele -B
Mr Watkins -B
Mr Wood (L&B) -B
Mr Stephens -B
Mr Maccabe -B
Mr Lavery -B
Mr Beeton -B
Mr Perry -B
Mr Whysall -B
Ms Checksfield -B
Ms Mapstone -B
Mr Holmes, No 10
Mr Budd (Cab Office) -B
Mr Westmacott, HME Washington (via RID) -B
HMA Dublin -B
Mr Lamont, RID -B

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

RESUMPTION OF THE TALKS: OUTLINE HANDLING PLAN

I attach a possible outline handling plan for the resumption of the talks. It builds on Mr Stephens' submission of 7 August on the handling of decommissioning and should also be read with his submission of 26 July on handling any new IRA ceasefire, which the Secretary of State discussed last week.

2. The paper identifies some possible objectives which HMG might seek to achieve in the first couple of weeks after 9 September but it also sets out a number of steps which might be taken in support of those objectives in the period before 9 September. It would

CPL/465

therefore be helpful to know that the Secretary of State was - subject to developments, including in Derry - generally content for us to proceed to plan on this basis. In particular, would he be content for us to work towards

- an Adare in the week beginning 2 September

- meetings, perhaps later that week, with the UUP and if possible the SDLP

- a meeting between the two Government delegations and the Independent Chairmen on the evening of 8 September (depending on the Independent Chairmen's travel plans)

and would he be content for Michael Ancram to pursue the contacts suggested in paragraph 5 during the latter part of August?

(signed)

D J R HILL
CPL DIVISION
OAB 210 6591

CPL/465

RESUMPTION OF THE TALKS: OUTLINE HANDLING PLAN

Introduction

This paper aims to identify a strategy for making early substantive progress in the talks when they resume on 9 September. As such it suggests a number of steps which might be taken in the period before 9 September as well as objectives we might aim to achieve and approaches we might aim to follow in the first couple of weeks of the resumed talks.

Background

2. Mr Stephens' submission of 7 August draws attention to the serious risk that the talks could collapse in early September on the decommissioning issue, identifies a possible way through the various difficulties and lists a series of tactical handling proposals. This paper is built around those proposals.

3. The first hurdle to overcome is that, formally, the talks plenary has yet to agree an agenda for the rest of the opening plenary. There is a risk that discussion of that agenda (which could all too easily be dismissed as procedural wrangling) will become a proxy for the substantive address to decommissioning (which will be difficult enough), resulting in a prolonged stalemate. Irish Government and SDLP confidence in and commitment to the process - already badly shaken - could rapidly wither. The talks could collapse or be fatally damaged; and there would be no incentive for Sinn Fein to seek to rejoin the political process. Meanwhile, the approach of the UK general election only leaves a narrow window of opportunity in which to make substantive progress.

Suggested Objectives

4. HMG's overriding objective should therefore be to secure early forward movement in the talks and create a new sense of impetus. Against that background, our specific tactical objectives for the resumption of the talks might be to:

(a) reach very early (preferably prior) agreement that the resumed plenary should begin to hear opening statements from the talks participants, without prejudice to the rest of the agenda for the opening plenary. That should move the focus away from decommissioning and on to the prospects for a comprehensive political settlement. HMG's draft opening statement (which might be published) and most of the others should strike a positive and constructive tone, reminding people of the potential value of the talks process. We should avoid any time limits, giving talks participants at least a couple of days (perhaps a week) to settle down together. We might revive the idea of a round of questions intended to elicit explanations of the parties' opening statements, a non-confrontational piece of pre-negotiation which worked well in 1991 and 1992;

(b) secure early agreement on an agenda for the rest of the opening plenary. This might be facilitated by remitting consideration to the Business Committee while plenary hears opening statements and/or by proposing a radically shorter and completely neutral agenda. The agenda proposed by the two Governments on 30 July is at Annex A and a possible alternative at Annex B. Apart from being more neutral and offering less scope for a proxy debate on the approach to decommissioning, an agenda on these lines offers less scope for delaying tactics from participants who may be reluctant to move on;

(c) handle work on the drawing up of a comprehensive agenda through an exchange of written proposals and/or in a sub-plenary format; the objective being to

(d) promote an early substantive address to the decommissioning issue in plenary mode. That debate

should be handled in the ways suggested in Mr Stephens' submission: create an opportunity to publish HMG's opening statement on decommissioning (which should provide considerable reassurance for Unionists); let the discussion run for a while but then aim to secure convergence around a set of conclusions on the lines of Annex A to Mr Stephens' submission; play in the suggested workplan for the sub-committee on decommissioning, to supplement or replace the current terms of reference; and create maximum capital from the publication of the draft Decommissioning Bills.

An approach on these lines stands at least a good chance of injecting some pace into the talks and generating a sequence of positive developments (opening statements, statements on decommissioning, a comprehensive agenda for the talks, agreement on a workplan for the decommissioning sub-committee, publication of draft bills) which, if not reflecting substantive negotiations, would at least show that the talks were addressing substantive issues.

Preparatory Steps

5. The precise nature and timing of any preparatory steps may well depend on events on the ground but the gameplan should clearly include:

(a) contact with the Irish Government to keep them up to the mark represented by 6 June "Scenario", rekindle their commitment to the talks process and rebuild their confidence in HMG. Specific objectives might be to encourage them to appreciate the political pressures on the Unionists parties, the UUP in particular - and to encourage them to discuss the issues with the UUP; and to secure their general support for the handling objectives listed above and the approach to decommissioning

CPL/465

suggested in Mr Stephens' submission. We should probably plan on holding an Adare meeting in the week beginning 2 September, with contact at official level before that. (Mr Thomas and Mr O'hUiginn plan to meet in the latter part of August and that may lead on to a meeting of the Liaison Group);

(b) contact with the UUP to secure their support for the handling objectives listed above and lower their expectations of what is achievable on decommissioning in the opening plenary, while encouraging them to think that they could secure credit for pressurising the two Governments into showing clear evidence of movement on the decommissioning issue before the launch of the three strands. Some "straight talking" may be necessary, perhaps from the Prime Minister, on the political consequences of Unionists being seen to stymie the talks over decommissioning when Sinn Fein are not even present. We might also continue to encourage Mr Trimble's thought that it would be desirable for the UUP to have a further meeting with the Irish Government. That might point to a meeting between Michael Ancram and Mr Trimble when the latter returns from holiday, followed up if necessary by the Prime Minister. It might be prudent to pencil in an HMG/UUP bilateral in the week before 9 September, possibly after any Adare meeting;

(c) some contact with the Loyalist parties. This could well be desirable in any event, to give them an opportunity to blow off steam and to help us assess their mood. In relation to the talks process it would be desirable to reconfirm their position on decommissioning; re-assure them, without going into details, that our proposed approach should not prejudice their position; and prepare the ground for the handling objectives listed above. If

CPL/465

events on the ground do not make such contacts controversial, a meeting (or separate meetings for each party) with Michael Ancram during the second half of August would be worthwhile;

(d) contact with the SDLP. While it may be better to operate via the Irish Government in developing support for our approach to handling decommissioning, there would be advantage in maintaining direct lines of communication with the SDLP. At a general level, especially after Drumcree [and 10 August?] there could be much value in giving them an opportunity to express their concerns and taking the opportunity to reiterate HMG's commitment to a balanced political accommodation, parity of esteem etc. A meeting in the week beginning 2 September would be desirable though logistical considerations may militate against it: perhaps Michael Ancram could telephone John Hume and/or Seamus Mallon later this month to assess their mood at that point;

(e) some contact with the other parties. The Alliance Party and NIWC would respond well to the offer of a general chat. The DUP and UKUP have been critical of previous lack of contact. Michael Ancram might, if it were convenient, spend a Monday or Tuesday at Castle Buildings later in August to mix with party representatives informally and perhaps have a couple of bilaterals. I know he was keen to develop contact with Peter Robinson and it could be valuable to pursue that;

(f) some attention to the public presentation of the Government's commitment to, and the continuing validity of, the talks process. CMT will be giving further thought to an Autumn Information Strategy. The BIA Conference (6-8 September) provides a timely and highly appropriate for a significant scene-setting speech which

CPL/465

could be followed up in the Secretary of State's address to the BIIPB ten days later. There may be a need for an earlier speech and/or article to stimulate renewed interest in the talks process and counter some of the Jeremiahs. There are distinct audiences within Northern Ireland and others in the Republic, in Great Britain and overseas, especially in the United States, which we should aim to address. The Prime Minister may wish to contribute;

(g) briefing the Independent Chairmen on how the two Governments propose to approach the resumption of the opening plenary. This would need to be fitted in after any Adare and ideally after any meeting with the UUP but before 9 September (given that the plenary will meet at 10 am). Depending on the Chairmen's travel plans a meeting with both Governments on the evening of 8 September may be indicated. (It may also be worth pursuing the Prime Minister's offer of a meeting with Senator Mitchell before the talks resume.) Meanwhile officials will see what can be done to keep the staffers at least generally in touch with developments.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT TEAM
8 AUGUST 1996

CPL/465

Annex A

(30 July)

PROPOSED AGENDA FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE OPENING PLENARY

The two Governments propose the following agenda for the remainder of the opening plenary:

1. Opening Statements.

2. Discussion of comprehensive agenda for negotiations.

3. Consideration of International Body's proposals on decommissioning and mechanisms necessary to enable further progress to be made on decommissioning alongside negotiations in the three strands.

4. Adoption of comprehensive agenda.

5. a. launch of three-stranded negotiations

   b. establishment of whatever mechanisms to enable further progress to be made on decommissioning are agreed pursuant to the consideration at item 3.

6. Concluding remarks by the Independent Chairman.

Annex B

(8 August)

POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE AGENDA FOR THE RESUMED OPENING PLENARY

1. Opening Statements.

2. Comprehensive Agenda for the Negotiations.

3. International Body's Proposals on Decommissioning.

4. Conclusion of Opening Plenary.