

4. Feb. 1997 11:04

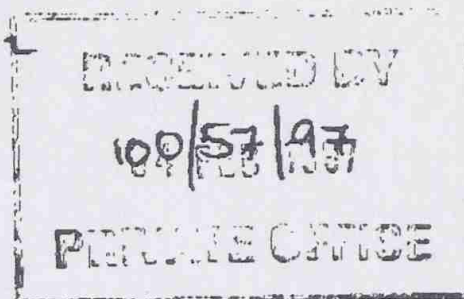
S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722

No. 3372 P. 2/9

CONFIDENTIAL

Copy to
S&S Box 14cc FA/APS
Press

FROM: JONATHAN STEPHENS
ASSOCIATE POLITICAL DIRECTOR (L)
3 FEBRUARY 1997



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 Steele - B
Mr Thomas (L&B) - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Leach - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Wood (L&B) - B
Mr Beeton - B
Mr Brooker - B
Mr Hill - B
Mr Lavery - B
Mr Maccabe - B
Mr Sanderson, Cab Off (via IPL) - B
HMA Dublin - B
Mr Westmacott, W'ton (via RID) - B
Mr Lamont, RID - B

File
JH 7/2

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

TALKS: PLENARY, 4 FEBRUARY

As the Secretary of State knows, our meeting with the UUP this afternoon offered no encouragement that they are prepared to work with the sort of decommissioning package we have identified this side of the Election. They were explicit that we should now be working on soft landing scenarios. We have, accordingly, told the Irish Government that we are now working towards a soft landing.

Objectives

2. Our objectives now therefore become:

- to preserve the process intact over the election period, with as little damage as possible to its credibility;
- in particular, to park the talks on the basis of an agreement to resume after the elections;

- 1 -

CONFIDENTIAL

POLDEVT/2758/CAO

4. Feb. 1997 11:04

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722

No. 3372 P. 3/9

CONFIDENTIAL

- in the meantime, to keep the talks going for as long as possible without damaging their credibility.

Planning for a soft landing

3. The plan we discussed with the Secretary of State and Michael Ancram tonight to achieve these objectives is as follows:

- tomorrow's plenary: invite the Independent Chairmen to undertake consultations with all the participants on how best the process may be carried forward, with a view to reporting to plenary next Tuesday;
- the British and Irish Governments, in the meantime, work up a possible joint statement which might form the basis for "parking" the talks. The Secretary of State's meeting with Mr Spring on Wednesday afternoon offers an opportunity to discuss what this might say, but our objective would be to achieve a statement which records, in neutral fashion and without attributing blame, where we have got to and what are the outstanding issues, as well as securing agreement on a commitment to resume talks after the elections. The two Governments put their joint thoughts to the Independent Chairmen by the end of the week;
- the Independent Chairmen, when they report to plenary next Tuesday, say that it is clear from their discussions that the talks should be parked over the election period and offer a statement (adopting much, we hope, of our draft) to the participants for this purpose;
- the plenary then adjourns for a further week to allow consultations on the basis of this draft statement;
- the plenary then resumes (on this plan, on Tuesday 18 February) to adopt whatever "parking" statement can be agreed.

- 2 -

CONFIDENTIAL

POLDEVT/2758/CAO

4. Feb. 1997 11:04

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722

No. 3372 P. 4/9

CONFIDENTIAL

4. If successful, this will carry the process on until we are beyond the middle of February. It may turn out that agreeing the "soft landing" may take more time than we anticipate, in which case we will be able to run the process on beyond then. But, given where we are now, it is difficult to see us taking up much more time with any credibility.

5. The opposite risk, which will require careful management to avoid, is that once it becomes clear there is no prospect of progress this side of the election, the process quickly collapses in a welter of recriminations.

Tuesday's plenary

6. It is to try and avoid this that we need to manage tomorrow's plenary particularly carefully. With this in mind, we have already fixed meetings as follows:

- 8.30 am briefing meeting with the Government team
- 10.00 am meeting with the Irish Government
- 11.00 am meeting between the Chairmen and both Governments.

7. I attach a first draft both of what Ministers might say at tomorrow's plenary and what we might suggest the Independent Chairmen (Mr Holkeri) might also say. If Ministers are content with this sort of outline, we should put it to the Irish Government and the Chairmen as soon as possible tomorrow morning.

8. The indications from yesterday's meeting are that the Irish Government, if they know what we intend, will co-operate with us in managing the process so as to achieve the softest possible landing.

- 3 -

CONFIDENTIAL

POLDEVT/2758/CAO

4. Feb. 1997 11:05

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722

No. 3372 P. 5/9

CONFIDENTIAL

They also indicated that they expected SDLP co-operation to this end. The UUP should not be surprised by the line we will be taking.

9. But, in addition to those we have already arranged to see, we should aim to brief at least the following parties in advance of the plenary meeting:

- Alliance Party, whose co-operation we could look for in managing tomorrow's plenary smoothly;
- the Loyalist parties, who will be most concerned at the prospect of the process being "parked" in the next couple of weeks. We shall need to ensure, at the very least, that they are not taken by surprise.

10. We shall also need to consider carefully what public line to take after the plenary. In one sense, what we are doing will not be news, because it is what everyone expects to happen. But, in another sense, once it is clear (as I suspect it will be soon after the plenary) that the Government itself is now planning on a soft landing, there may well be a lot of critical comment. For that reason, we shall also need to make sure that No 10 are fully briefed.

(Signed JAS)

JONATHAN STEPHENS
APD (L)

- 4 -

CONFIDENTIAL

POLDEVT/2758/CAO