

4. Feb. 1997 11:05

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722

No. 3372 P. 8/9

CONFIDENTIAL

PLENARY: 4 FEBRUARY

Speaking Note: Secretary of State/Michael Ancram

1. Mr Chairman, when we met last week we agreed to undertake further intensive bilaterals. We said then that we did not detect significant signs of movement away from established positions on the issue of decommissioning. It was not easy to see a way through the impasse, but, nonetheless, we thought it was important to explore every avenue of possible advance before the election.
2. We have indeed taken advantage of the past week to hold a substantial number of further discussions, as I know have yourselves and others. We have, in particular, explored the prospects for making progress now on the decommissioning issue so as to enable us to move on into substantive political negotiations after the forthcoming elections.
3. In the course of these discussions, we have identified a number of ideas as to ways in which progress might be made. Some of these may well help achieve progress in due course: none has been ruled out as a result of our bilateral discussions. But it has, increasingly, become clear over the past week that it is now very difficult to see how constructive progress can be made on the decommissioning issue in the immediate weeks ahead as the shadow of both the general and the local elections looms.
4. Despite our best and intensive efforts - with, I might say, fruitful and valuable exchanges with a number of parties - the British Government cannot see from our own rounds of bilaterals a prospect of progress emerging in the next few weeks. We would not, of course, stand in the way of efforts by others if they can see a prospect of progress - indeed, we would do all that we could to encourage and facilitate such progress. But, for our

- 7 -

CONFIDENTIAL

POLDEVT/2758/CAO



4. Feb. 1997 11:06

S OF S PRIVATE OFFICE 1712106722

No. 3372 P. 9/9

## CONFIDENTIAL

part, we have to say that our own contacts have not given us grounds for thinking that further substantive progress on the decommissioning issue can be made in the period up to the elections.

5. I understand, Mr Chairman, that a number of parties have put to you the suggestion that it would be helpful at this stage if the Independent Chairmen were to assist the parties in assessing where we are, and how the process might best go forward over this period until the elections are over.
6. For our part, we think it is right that we should now all take stock of where we are and how best to go forward from here - including whether there remains merit in exploring further avenues of progress on decommissioning, or whether it is best to give thought now to how we can most constructively use this period until the elections are over so as to create the best prospects for progress when the talks resume after the elections. We believe that it would be valuable if the Independent Chairmen undertook a series of consultations with all parties to this end, with a view to reporting back to plenary as to how best the process might now be taken forward, next Tuesday.
7. Whatever we decide, one thing remains clear. This is the only talks process we have. It may not be ideal, but there is no other show in town. We remain of the view that it has the potential to enable comprehensive political negotiations across all the key relationships to be undertaken by all the political parties and the two Governments, as appropriate. We are therefore fully committed to this process and to continuing to seek progress through it. We continue to believe that progress is achievable - and, indeed, that an overall political agreement is attainable.

- 8 -

CONFIDENTIAL

POLDEVT/2758/CAO