

cc FA/APS  
Press

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FROM: GILLIAN PREECE  
11 February 1997

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cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B  
 PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) - B  
 PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B  
 PS/Malcolm Moss (DHSS,DOE&L) - B  
 PS/Baroness Denton (DED,DANI&L) - B  
 PS/PUS (B&L) - B  
 PS/Sir David Fell - B  
 Mr Thomas (B&L) - B  
 Mr Steele - B  
 Mr Leach - B  
 Mr Bell - B  
 Mr Watkins - B  
 Mr Stephens - B  
 Mr Wood (B&L) - B  
 Mr Beeton - B  
 Mr Brooker - B  
 Mr Hill (B&L) - B  
 Mr Lavery - B  
 Mr Maccabe - B  
 Mr Perry - B  
 Mr Priestly - B  
 Ms Bharucha - B  
 Ms Mapstone - B  
 Mr Whysall (B&L) - B  
 Mr Sanderson, Cab Off (via IPL) - B  
 Mr Dickinson, TAU - B  
 Mr Lamont, RID FCO - B  
 HMA Dublin - B  
 Miss C Byrne, TPU, HO (via IPL) - B  
 Mr Campbell Bannerman - B  
 Mr Westmacott (via RID) - B  
 Mrs McNally (B&L) - B  
 Mr Holmes, No 10

File  
Jan 12/2.

## NOTE FOR THE RECORD

TALKS: 11 FEBRUARY 1997

A quiet day, the principal business of which was a report by the Chairmen on their meetings with parties. The upshot was a general desire to maintain the Talks in session up to the announcement of an election, with some indications that a modest further measure of agreement might be possible - though Senator Mitchell is not over-hopeful.

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Detail

At the morning pre-brief, it was suggested that there were growing perceptions of drift in the Talks, with no-one in charge. Such perceptions might be damaging and, like the prospect of the process turning to recrimination, at some point be an argument for an early move to a "soft landing".

Amendments were discussed to the draft closing statement for the Talks. It was agreed that the revised version would be discussed with the Irish later. There was in this context some discussion of the obligation to wind-up the Forum. It was pointed out that much turned on whether the Talks were "suspended" or "adjourned". If they were "suspended", then there was a requirement to terminate the Forum. If they were "adjourned", then there was a power to do so, but it could not be said to be mandatory. Continuing activity in Castle Buildings would open up the argument by Unionists that the Talks were merely adjourned, and that the Forum might be kept open.

Meeting with Chairmen

At the evening meeting attended by all three Chairmen, the Irish led by Mr Coveney and British officials under Mr Thomas, Senator Mitchell reported on the day's business. It had consisted of meetings with the UUP, SDLP, and Alliance Party (separately and then together), the four smaller parties together, and the DUP. (The Chairmen had not met the UKUP, who had been unable to arrange a time because of "scheduling difficulties" and had refused a meeting tomorrow.)

The UUP had been asked what needed to be changed in the document of 11 December 1996 on item 2(c) (mechanisms for decommissioning) to secure their agreement. Their answers were passed in turn to the SDLP and Alliance; they had objected to the Unionist proposals, but the three parties

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nevertheless agreed that the discussion was worth pursuing - though they wished to consult colleagues, especially the UUP (who were led by Mr Empey at the second meeting - Mr Taylor had been at the first). A further meeting with the parties is planned for next week (perhaps Tuesday: Senator Mitchell may be away for some part of Monday).

The SDLP had suggested that it would be difficult to see any reason to come back to talks without "some progress" before the election. "Some progress" apparently amounted to agreement on 2(c) - even though disagreement remained on other aspects of decommissioning, notably the UUP insistence on a prior tranche - and on the comprehensive agenda. There was agreement among parties that this might be feasible within the timing.

The four smaller parties had presented (the NIWC speaking on behalf of all of them) a proposal for the Liaison sub-committee. This aimed to split the difference between the SDLP approach (under which the sub-committee might consider other confidence issues) and that of the UUP (who did not wish such issues to be within its remit); there would be one committee, but working to two agendas. The document embodying the proposal had not been passed to other parties, but those parties had been invited to a briefing meeting being organised by the Chairmen tomorrow. All had agreed except the DUP, who declined to discuss issues on item 2(c) until item 2(a) was resolved; and the UKUP, who had not replied.

The two Governments would also be offered a briefing tomorrow (Mrs McWilliams will be in touch).

All the parties had made clear to the Chairmen that they wished the talks to continue until a date was announced for the election, and that a date for resumption must also be agreed. (Senator Mitchell had also asked about likely election dates: many predicted an election on 20 March, to be announced on 24 February). The parties' view was that if the election were on 1 May, resumption should not be until after the local elections; if the date were 20 March, there

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should be some activity before those elections; if on 10 April, views were ambivalent. The Chairmen are to prepare suggestions on timing based on these possibilities.

Senator Mitchell's conclusion from the day's discussions was that it was worth pursuing the discussion; if the UUP's apparent willingness to make progress were borne out following discussion with colleagues, there was still a possibility of agreement before the election. But he cautioned against hopes being too far raised; parties might simply be seeking to avoid the danger of being held responsible for the process breaking down.

At the plenary session, the Senator would make a brief report on discussions, and propose a further plenary next week, to permit continued discussion; he would then go round the table - but probably, following representations from the four smaller parties, starting with someone other than the Governments or Alliance, as had previously been the practice.

Both Mr Coveney and Mr Thomas expressed encouragement at the Chairmen's report. Mr O hUiggin wondered whether other participants would question why the various parties' papers had not been published. The Senator's view was that publication was at the discretion of the author.

(Signed)

[A J WHYSALL FOR]  
GILLIAN PREECE

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