

11.FEB.1997 10:46  
CPL1/26000

NIO CPL 0171 210 0229

NO.222 P.2

CONFIDENTIAL

INT13/97

From: Peter Smyth  
Political Affairs Division  
10 February 1997

*File  
JH  
11/2.*

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&L) - 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

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

TALKS: MONDAY 10 FEBRUARY

Summary

Two stocktaking meetings between the Independent Chairmen and officials of both Governments failed to reveal any cause for optimism about the immediate future of the Talks.

While no party wishes to accept responsibility for bringing the Talks to an end, neither can anyone envisage sufficient progress being made to warrant a prolongation of structured dialogue much beyond the next few weeks. Suggestions that the Chairmen should adopt a mediation role were suspected of being a tactic by Unionists to defer an announcement of suspension.

CONFIDENTIAL

PG/TALKS/3084



11.FEB.1997 10:46

NIO CPL 0171 210 0229

NO.222 P.3

CPL1/26000

CONFIDENTIAL

Detail

At 11.30, Prime Minister Holkeri and General de Chastelain briefed the Secretary of State and officials from the two Governments. The Chairmen had had meetings, in various configurations, with all the parties at the Talks. In general, the group of four small parties (Women's Coalition, Labour, UDP, PUP) were more anxious than the trilateral group (UUP, SDLP, Alliance) to keep discussions going for as long as possible; while the DUP and the UKUP in separate meetings had revealed nothing beyond their customary negative analysis. If there were any chinks of light, they lay in the fact that no party actively wanted to end the Talks process; and of there being a tacit acceptance by all concerned of the value of Talks as an aid to propping up the Loyalist ceasefire.

The Chairmen reported that the Women's Coalition in particular had made a number of positive suggestions about arrangements for the future conduct of business in Plenary sessions. These had included the Chairmen themselves paying somewhat less attention to the Unionist groupings around the Talks table; the desirability of not

accepting interruptions during the initial tour de table; and the possibility of varying the practice (brought about by the seating arrangements) of the Alliance delegation always being invited to make a statement following the comments of the two Governments.

Set against that, however, there were no signs that the impasse on decommissioning was any closer to resolution. Mr Holkeri had asked the tripartite grouping to address the issue of who would benefit from agreement being reached on decommissioning, and all three parties had concurred that the political benefits would be mutual. Simultaneously, however, all three had registered doubts that any realistic chance of reaching such agreement currently existed. The group as a whole seemed resigned to failure; and although they had not ruled out the possibility of producing a paper on the way forward, there seemed to be little enthusiasm for such a project. (The four small parties were keen to put their thoughts on paper, but the value of such an exercise, without UUP and SDLP co-operation, must be doubtful.)

CONFIDENTIAL



11.FEB.1997 10:47  
CPL1/26000

NIO CPL 0171 210 0229

NO.222 P.4

CONFIDENTIAL

A brief discussion took place on the possible timing of a General Election. The Secretary of State could offer no insights, but felt that the Prime Minister would probably wish to preserve his room for manoeuvre, and defer an announcement until just before Easter. That pointed to the desirability of keeping the Talks going until the end of February - in view of the lack of enthusiasm among the political parties, it was probably unrealistic to envisage the process continuing beyond that date. The possibility of ad hoc bilateral meetings taking place outside the Talks framework had not been discounted, although it was noted that the Irish would view this with slight uneasiness as it represented a blurring of the agreed process. With regard to the continuance of the Forum, the Secretary of State said he had not yet reached a final decision, but was inclined to the view that, with Talks in abeyance, it would be difficult to justify prolonging the existence of such a Unionist-dominated body in the runup to elections.

It was agreed, in conclusion, that British and Irish officials would begin discussing a joint text which the Chairmen could consider deploying at the appropriate time. Such an announcement of a soft landing would ideally be played in before the Talks themselves reached the stage of rancorous and damaging exchanges; but not so soon that any remaining possibility of useful progress was curtailed thereby.

At 3.30 pm, with the arrival of Senator Mitchell, the Chairmen and the representatives of the two Governments convened once more. Senator Mitchell reported that a meeting between the Chairmen and the tripartite group that afternoon had produced some indication that the main parties would be anxious to let the Chairmen pursue a mediation role. It was not clear how genuine this proposal was - it had to be seen in the context of John Taylor's urgings that the Talks process should be protracted at least until the date for the General Election was announced. But the Chairmen felt they had a duty to explore all avenues for progress, and had arranged meetings with all the parties for the following day. This would allow them

CONFIDENTIAL

PG/TALKS/3084



11.FEB.1997 10:47

NIO CPL 0171 210 0229

NO.222 P.5

CPL1/26000

CONFIDENTIAL

to have a greater feel for the mood of the participants before Wednesday's Plenary. The Secretary of State said that his sense was that the parties were all aware of the dangers arising from allowing a vacuum to develop, but these fears were not sufficient to overcome their reluctance to do anything to prevent such a dangerous situation arising. He suspected that, at the end of the day, they would leave it to the two Governments and the Chairmen to decide on a date for suspending the Talks. Senator Mitchell noted that Trimble had not been present when Taylor made his comments; and added that he rather inclined to the view put forward by Seamus Close, that all the parties were now engaged in an exercise to avoid blame for the Talks winding up. When he had asked at the trilateral meeting whether there was any prospect of agreement on decommissioning, there had been no reply.

Mr O'hUiginn said that his preference would be for the Talks to be parked without affording the participants an opportunity for a major debate, and the chance this would offer them to put down pre-conditions about the circumstances in which the process might be re-started. It would seem sensible (at the appropriate time) for the Chairmen to give a strong lead, providing a clear view on the need for suspension, and the date for resumption, minimising the scope for an open-ended discussion, and cutting down on the opportunities for some parties to play games.

Senator Mitchell said it was the intention of the Chairmen, when the time came, to ensure that the proposals they brought forward would be both specific and capable of commanding general acceptance. That said, he felt that he and his colleagues were under an obligation to carefully examine any proposals which looked as if they had a chance of succeeding. When the time came to suspend the Talks, it had to be because everyone recognised that no realistic prospect remained of further progress being made, and that prolonging the life of the process had become counter-productive.

CONFIDENTIAL

PG/TALKS/3084



11.FEB.1997 10:48  
CPL1/26000

NIO CPL 0171 210 0229

NO.222 P.6

CONFIDENTIAL

A general discussion then ensued about the possible date for a General Election, the impact this would have on continuance of the Talks, and when a view would have to be reached that prolonging the process served no useful purpose. The Chairmen gave details of the meetings which had been arranged with all the parties on an individual basis the following day, and offered to provide the two Governments with a read-out at the close of business. The British side explained that logistical difficulties would make it impossible for them to field a senior team until late in the day; but it was agreed that a 6.00 pm meeting was feasible.

The Chairmen concluded with a rather gloomy prognostication that, whenever a date was announced for the suspension of the Talks, irrespective of the surrounding circumstances, some parties were bound to protest that the decision had been taken against their wishes. Nevertheless, that position had not yet been reached; and in order to minimise the opportunities for rancour, it was important for the Chairmen to be seen to make every effort to promote success before making an announcement which would be, de facto, an admission of failure.

(Signed)

PETER SMYTH

CONFIDENTIAL

PG/TALKS/3084