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FROM: JONATHAN STEPHENS
Associate Political Director (L)
16 July 1997

✓ PB
 AC

PS/Secretary of State (L&B)

cc

PS/Mr Ingram (L&B)
 PS/Mr Murphy (L&B)
 PS/PUS (L&B)
 PS/Sir David Fell
 Mr Steele
 Mr Thomas
 Mr Bell
 Mr Leach
 Mr Ray
 Mr Watkins
 Mr Beeton
 Mr Brooker
 Mr Hill
 Mr Maccabe
 Mr Lavery
 Mr Warner
 Mr Budd, Cabinet Office
 Mr Lamont, RID
 HMA, Dublin
 Mr Holmes, No 10
 Mr Carter, HOLAB

Fib
Paul

LIAISON GROUP: SUMMARY RECORD

Yesterday's Liaison Group was attended on the Irish side by Mr O hUiginn, Mr Mansergh, the Irish Ambassador, Mr Donoghue, Mr Kirwan, Mr Hickey and Mr Montgomery. On the British side, we started with Mr Thomas, Mr Budd, Mr Bell, Mr Lamont, Mr Brooker, Mr Hill, Mr Lavery, Mr Warner and myself, although a number of us had to leave before the lunch.

Key points

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2. A business like and constructive meeting, marked by a genuine attempt by the Irish side to be helpful in providing Mr Trimble with some reassurance. A redistribution of chairmanships was agreed, subject to approval by Ministers on both sides. There was some general discussion of Plan B, but the Irish side were content to cross this bridge when we came to it. In the margins, Mansergh was upbeat on the prospects for an IRA ceasefire in the next few weeks.

Text on decommissioning

3. Mr Brooker's note of 15 July records the text which was agreed between both sides. The Irish side were more helpful and forthcoming than might have been expected from the official level reactions to Trimble's needs, while reminding us that the Taoiseach's letter established that the Irish side would not give credence to "fantasy football" scenarios. The text which emerged on Mr Trimble's key requirement that a scheme should be available for implementation from 15 September reflected Irish concerns that:

- the initiative should remain with the Commission;
- the Commission should formulate options for draft schemes, rather than a single scheme which would suggest that, whatever the parties thought, decommissioning could happen in only one way;
- in doing so, the Commission would be working in conformity with the Mitchell Report and its own terms of reference, so avoiding any suggestion that those would be overtaken.

4. The end result should mean that schemes are available from 15 September which could be given immediate effect as soon as there was any indication of readiness to start decommissioning.

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5. Other points were quickly resolved. The Irish having moved significantly on Trimble's main point, we agreed to delete our text indicating that failure to contribute to due progress on decommissioning might suggest that a party had demonstrably dishonoured its commitment to the Mitchell principles and should therefore be excluded. Mr Mansergh said he was particularly worried by this suggestion.

Deployment of speaking notes

6. Subject to Ministers' views on both sides, it was agreed that the British Government would speak to the agreed text and, at the conclusion, would make clear both Governments thought that all the issues had been clearly dealt with and did not propose to answer further questions. We would, however, circulate the speaking notes to all participants. It was also agreed that there seemed little point in giving the text to the UUP before the plenary.

Chairmanships

7. It was agreed, again subject to clearance by Ministers on both sides, that both Governments would nominate De Chastelain as Chairman of the Independent Commission and would look for a Finn and an American to fill the other positions on the Commission. With De Chastelain detached to the Independent Commission, we agreed that his position as Chairman of Strand 2 would best be taken by Mitchell and his position as Chairman of the Business Committee would best be taken by Holkeri. Under the existing rules of procedure, Mitchell would Chair the Committee of the Plenary and the sub-Committees on Decommissioning and Confidence-Building Measures, although he could deploy Holkeri as his alternate if necessary.

Plan B

8. Over lunch, there was some discussion of what the Governments would do if their proposals failed to secure approval on 23 July. The Irish side noted that it might be

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helpful to have some discussion in the context of Friday's IGC, although it might be clear by then that a more benign scenario was the likely outcome.

9. Mr Thomas explained that in the immediate aftermath of failure on 23 July, we envisaged a quick holding statement. This might say that we would review the current situation with all the participants. We did not expect that further discussion on decommissioning, coming after many months of discussion already, would be any more likely to lead to the issue being resolved. We nonetheless remained committed to an overall political settlement, acceptable to unionists and nationalists, and endorsed in referendums. We would have to review how best to take this forward urgently.

10. Mr Thomas suggested that, fairly quickly after 23 July, Irish and British Ministers would wish to meet leading, possibly, to a meeting between the two Prime Ministers to set out how they envisaged taking the process forward. Mr Mansergh mentioned that, in this scenario, the two Governments would need to move quickly so that the pressure on Sinn Féin for a ceasefire in early August was not allowed to diminish.

11. In a general discussion, there seemed broad agreement (although without any commitment on either side) that:

- our declared objective should be for the two Governments to consult the parties with a view to putting forward proposals which might then be put to referendums;
- but both sides recognised it would be suicidal to proceed to referendums if the key parties in Northern Ireland had not first been co-opted;
- it would therefore be desirable to get back to roundtable negotiations before putting any proposals to referendums, but at the outset the consultation process would need to be more fluid;

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- the existing requirements would apply to Sinn Féin's participation;
- the current talks would be suspended, meaning that the elected forum would cease to exist;
- it would be helpful, against the possibility that roundtable negotiations could be reconvened, to keep the Independent Chairmen available for that contingency but that might not be possible unless we were prepared to pay some retainer;
- there could be advantage in spreading the net wider than the established political parties in any process of consultation by, for example, publishing consultation papers and making them generally available;
- on decommissioning, we should stand by our joint proposals making it clear that we were ready to put the Independent Commission in place, for example. But, freed from the constraints of what was necessary to enable various parties to sit down together, we should avoid making progress on decommissioning a precondition for continued involvement in the consultation process.

12. Mr Donoghue repeatedly tried to run old Irish ideas that all this should take place within the ambit of Strand 3. He was sat upon by both British and Irish colleagues.

13. There were no signs that the Irish side were so attracted by Plan B that they would prematurely abandon the current negotiations. When Mr Donoghue, again, pressed as to whether we had yet drafted a possible statement on Plan B, Mr O hUiginn said we could cross that bridge when we came to it.

IRA ceasefire

14. In the margins of the meeting, both Mr O hUiginn and Mr Mansergh expressed optimism about the prospects for an IRA ceasefire within the next few weeks.

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Mr O hUiginn said that he was hopeful and that everything was coming into place. Mr Mansergh said that the text we had agreed that morning would itself be helpful and would lay to rest a number of Sinn Féin concerns as to how we would be dealing with the various unionist points. He also asked whether, following an IRA ceasefire, we would be likely to object to visa requests by Sinn Féin leaders to visit the US. Mr Thomas said that this Government would take the approach that such visa requests were a matter for the country concerned to consider. Once a ceasefire had been declared, we would not seek to intervene.

15. Mr Mansergh also asked, while making it clear that it was not a major point, about the attitude towards the use of facilities at Westminster by Sinn Féin MPs following a ceasefire and Sinn Féin's admittance to negotiations. I explained that this was a matter for the Speaker and, although she might well want to know the Government's view, she was genuinely independent of the Government. If anyone wanted to suggest that, following a ceasefire, the Speaker's ruling should be changed, that would be a matter for the Speaker to consider.

16. More generally, Mr Thomas told Mr Mansergh that this Government "would not look a gift horse in the mouth" and he was happy to be quoted on that (although not in public).

(Signed JAS)

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