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FROM: P N BELL
JOINT SECRETARY
4 October 1996
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FOR 11 AM MEETING

| | | |
|-----|-----------------------------|---|
| cc: | PS/Secretary of State (B&L) | B |
| | PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) | B |
| | PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) | B |
| | PS/PUS (B&L) | B |
| | PS/Sir David Fell | B |
| | Mr Steele | B |
| | Mr Watkins | B |
| | Mr Hill | B |
| | Mr Perry | B |
| | Mr Stephens | B |
| | Mr Priestly | B |
| | Mr Maccabe | B |
| | Mr Lavery | B |
| | Mr Whysall (B&L) | B |
| | Ms Mapstone | B |
| | Ms Bharucha | B |
| | Mr Campbell Bannerman | B |
| | Mr Lamont, RID | B |
| | HMA, Dublin | B |
| | Mr Clarke, Dublin | B |
| | Ms Collins, CO (via IPL) | B |

TC
4/10

Jackie

MR THOMAS - B

CONVERSATION WITH MR DONOGHUE - 3 OCTOBER 1996

Our usual post delegation meeting yesterday tete a tete produced few surprises. So far as the Talks are concerned, all passion really does seem to be spent on the Irish side except that Mr Donoghue regarded Wednesday's assault on Sir George Quigley and Co as having reached new depths, even though he wondered whether the issue could not have been more sensitively introduced.

2. Nevertheless, depressing as these exchanges had been, and trying to put on one side that our next anticipated, if surreal triumph might be the finalisation of the Agenda for the Opening Plenary, four months after Talks had opened, I did my best to try and inject a more enthusiastic and positive approach to the Talks in ways that would not hint at the recent ingestion of prohibited substances.

3. In particular, I suggested that there was much to be said for an early meeting, once Mr O hUiginn had returned from Pittsburgh, for our sharing our thinking rapidly about ways around what I did not attempt to disguise was the impasse over decommissioning. I cannot claim that Mr Donoghue leapt at my suggestion; I suspect he believes that the Talks are doomed whatever we say; he was, when

pressed, more enthusiastic about a meeting of the Liaison Group (in

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in the margins of Castle Buildings) rather than a tete a tete
 FF between, say, yourself and Mr O hUiginn. Nevertheless, I did manage
 to engage his attention by suggesting, I think the thought came as a
 novelty to him, that there might, just possibly, be ways in the
 short-term around the impasse.

4. Emphasising that I was not speaking on instructions, but
 merely thinking aloud on the basis of well known and conspicuously
 inadequate thought processes, I wondered whether it might, following
 an Address to decommissioning in Plenary, be possible to "park" the
 issue (with the Parties, if you like, agreeing for the time being to
 disagree) until the question ceased to be academic, following a
 knock on the door from Sinn Fein following a ceasefire. Then the
 inevitable battle, which seems likely to prevent us at the moment
 from ever reaching the Strands, would have to be engaged.

5. But what could ever induce the Unionists to park the
 decommissioning and, in a metaphor I have used with you, not merely
 leave the battlements but leave the draw bridge down for Sinn Fein
 in due course to march in? Answer, the fact that if Sinn Fein
 declared a ceasefire and sought admission to the Talks (which are
 not quite the same thing), they would, first, have to sign up to the
 Mitchell principles, accept whatever the Talks acquis where at by
 that stage, but not be allowed to enter the Strands until agreement
 had been achieved on the way forward.

6. Interestingly, Mr Donoghue immediately saw the drawbacks of
 this from a Sinn Fein perspective: namely that, if they chose to
 enter the Talks, they would be doing so without a guarantee that
 they would be admitted into the Strands (indeed they would hit the
 decommissioning buffer immediately, or that the decommissioning
 issue would be resolved to their satisfaction. The proverbial pig
 in a poke. But without some such safeguard, I suggested, there
 could be no hope that the Unionists would consent to postpone
 Armageddon.

7. On the other hand, I argued, while it was easy to imagine
 Unionists and Sinn Fein objections, there might be considerable
 advantages to any "parking" strategy if (and if, and again if) this
 could be agreed:

- (a) it postponed the inevitable clash, on the sound Micawberish principle that "something may turn up"; and
- (b) that something may be progress in the Talks.

FF

8. Arguably, the only thing that will induce Sinn Fein to call a ceasefire and seek admission to the fear of being left out of a worthwhile Talks operation (so they may be prepared to face up to difficulties, immediately on their admission, about decommissioning). Equally if the Talks are going well, Unionists may not want to press their position on decommissioning a l'ontrance. In such circumstances what I suggest, may not be as probable. But it is at least not totally over the even horizon.

9. Such ideas were (far) less important in terms of whatever intrinsic merits they may or may not have, as in engaging Mr Donoghue and suggesting that there might be something even better - I had not then seen Mr Campbell Bannerman's cunning plan for the two sides to talk about. He said he would talk to Mr O hUiginn. We shall both need to keep up the pressure.

10. Finally, we reverted to the hardy perennial of what Ministers should, or should not say about RUC quests to the Secretariat. Once again, Mr Donoghue waived his gory locks at me and intimated that behind him were those whose locks were still gorier. Do not underestimate Irish adverse reactions about disclosure. Unionists' behaviour in the Talks, I fear, has unaccountably done nothing in Irish eyes to make them believe that they should be treated with exceptional favour

Signed:

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