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6 October 1997

*Dear John,***MEETING WITH MR TRIMBLE, 8 OCTOBER**

We presume that the Prime Minister's meeting with Mr Trimble on Wednesday 8 October will be the "private" meeting to discuss the substantive issues which Mr Trimble has been seeking for some time. It could be seen as a continuation and development of their conversation on 30 July.

The necessary briefing for such a discussion is set out in Dr Mowlam's letter of 25 September to the Prime Minister, with its accompanying annexes. Dr Mowlam would like Mr Murphy to attend the meeting if that would be appropriate.

From our perspective the key question is whether Mr Trimble is prepared to settle for something close to the substance of the Framework Documents (even though he will need to present any agreement as arising from very different foundations): if he can be assured that the essence of the project is to reconcile nationalists to the continuation of Northern Ireland's status as an integral part of the United Kingdom, would he be prepared to go along with:-

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- first with potentially radical changes within Northern Ireland to demonstrate that there is a level playing field between the two communities and;
- second, North/South institutions with some real if narrow functions, and a symbolic role which nationalists would need to exaggerate but which, in operation and in any extension of its task, would be wholly accountable to, and dependant on agreement by, the Northern Ireland Administration? (The Frameworks Document refers to the North South Institutions as being "dynamic", but the small print makes clear that any extension of its functions requires the agreement of the Northern Ireland Administration.)

Such changes would probably be necessary to secure constructive co-operation from nationalists and help give expression to the Irish national identity of the minority community in Northern Ireland.

His own thinking about a "Council of British Isles" (your letter of 30 July) could well represent a useful addition to the proposals in the Joint Framework Document regarding a new Anglo-Irish Agreement: constitutional reform in Great Britain could enhance the relevance of these ideas, which Mr Trimble began to develop in the 1992 talks. Nonetheless he may have an uphill task in persuading both the Irish Government and the nationalists on the one hand, and other parts of the United Kingdom on the other, that they have a shared interest in such a set of institutional arrangements. Just as his interest is to bury the North/South body in a wider structure, so the nationalist interest is to emphasise the distinct nature of arrangements on the island of Ireland.

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The forthcoming meeting may not be the time to get into a discussion of the handling of the negotiations, but it may be worth picking up Mr Trimble's comment that he would be keen to move quickly now the talks have got into substance. This has obvious political attractions for him. However, the corollary is that it may be unwise for him to press for early decisions on the principle of consent or on amendment of the Irish Constitution, both difficult issues for nationalists generally and Sinn Féin in particular. There is of course general agreement involving the whole spectrum of constitutional nationalism and the British Government on a set of propositions which reflect the principle of consent and a commitment by the Irish Government to reform Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution in the context of a comprehensive settlement. This was not the case in 1992, when the negotiations deadlocked on this issue; but much water has flowed under the bridge since then.

It is our judgement that the talks are ultimately likely to deliver satisfactory understandings on consent and on Articles 2 and 3, and even the Sinn Féin leadership is beginning to prepare the ground to accept that. However the Irish Government and SDLP may wish to protect Sinn Féin from having to confront this wider consensus too early in the negotiations (though we might test this); and if the UUP press these points too early it may first lead to delay. Agreement on an unqualified commitment to the principle of consent might be easier to achieve once we have at least got all the issues likely to arise in strands two and three on to the table. The Prime Minister might aim to explore how Mr Trimble intends to approach the negotiations and urge the need for careful tactical handling if the UUP is intending to seek early commitments on consent and Articles 2 and 3.

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Mr Trimble may raise his list of confidence building measures. I attach a checklist showing the positive response which the Government has already made and areas where further developments may be possible: we can give this further publicity at whatever is the best moment for Mr Trimble, perhaps before the next UUP Executive Committee meeting at the end of October.

*Yours ever,*

*Ken*

W K LINDSAY

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