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File
Ans.From: John Holmes
Date: 19 September 1997

PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND

Not much has changed in the course of today. The NIO are still negotiating with Jeffrey Donaldson about the terms of the procedural motion, and separately with the Irish. These discussions seem to be going reasonably well at the moment. They may continue over the weekend, but will in any case resume on Monday morning. The latest wheeze is to have a separate UUP-sponsored motion on decommissioning, to be nodded through, followed by a motion from the two Governments on the rest of the points. The UUP seem receptive to this, but let's see.

This discussion is on the basis that the motions would be presented and accepted in a plenary on Wednesday. But the UUP are not yet firmly committed to this timetable.

This means that we should be able to have a quiet weekend on the Northern Ireland front. Mo will be keeping a low media profile. There is no point in you speaking either to Trimble or the Taoiseach until the position is clearer, ie probably on Monday afternoon.

Meanwhile, in response to your request, the NIO have produced the attached note setting out what a political settlement might look like, and what the various sticking points are. It is typically wordy, in the NIO style, but the main points

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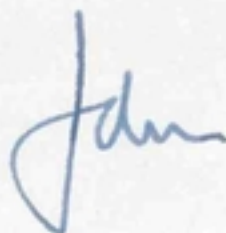
are there. Annex B on Points of Difference is the most useful. One real problem will be to bring the Unionists to overcome their (unnecessary) paranoia about the Framework Document. Your planned long session with Trimble will be important for this.

The covering note, not yet formally approved by Mo, brings out the point you have made that, while the Unionists are most nervous about the shape of a settlement and the slippery slope, the Nationalists face the more serious political problem in many ways. The NIO conclude that we should be even-handed between the different parties.

This is obviously true at one level, but, as I have said before, we cannot in my view be entirely neutral about the outcome if we mean what we say about valuing the Union. And the Unionists are terrified of a situation where the Irish Government and the Nationalists are on one side, with them on the other side, and us somewhere in the middle but wanting to work with the Irish Government more than with them. I think this is a legitimate fear, however exaggerated in some minds. At some stage you need to talk to Mo about what our stance should be.

N.I.?

Mo also suggests that a meeting in IN on all this could be useful. I agree. This is a legitimate matter for broad discussion among the Ministers most concerned.



JOHN HOLMES

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