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FROM: Mrs V E Sutherland, HMA, Dublin
 DATE: 1 October 1997

cc PB
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cc: PS/SofS (B&L)
 PS/Mr Ingram (B&L)
 PS/Mr Murphy (B&L)
 PS/PUS (B&L)
 Mr Steele
 Mr Stephens
 Mr Leach
 Mr Bell
 Mr Hill (B&L)
 Mr Brooker
 Ms Bharucha
 Mr Maccabe
 Mr Fergusson, RID
 PUSD, FCO (via RID)
 Mr Tebbitt (via RID)
 Mr John Holmes, PS/No.10 (by fax)
 Mr Nick Sanderson, Cabinet Office (by fax)

Mr Thomas

DAY IN BELFAST : MONDAY, 29 SEPTEMBER

1. I am grateful to Chris Maccabe for organising an excellent programme for me in Belfast on Monday. He is recording points which arose over dinner with Eileen Bell (Alliance), Dermot Nesbit (Ulster Unionists), Martin Morgan (SDLP) and Professor Paul Bew. Some additional impressions may be of interest.

2. Overall, I found greater optimism than I had expected about a successful outcome to the talks process. This was certainly the message of Dr Paul Campolo, the rousing Baptist preacher at Lord Alderdice's Prayer Breakfast. More importantly, it was also the general tenor of discussion over dinner, even if all present accepted there were many difficulties on the way, not least the untrustworthiness of Sinn Fein, a point made with particular emphasis by the SDLP representative.

3. Jeffrey Donaldson, whom I met earlier, seemed particularly upbeat. He told me the Ulster Unionists had joined the talks last week because they knew the time for change had come. The Paisley/McCarthy version of Unionism was outdated. Dr Paisley himself knew this. Ulster Unionists, on the other hand, were clear that they must not be afraid of change. If parties to such conflicts as those in South Africa or the Middle East could talk to their opponents, then so too could his party. Indeed, they had already had a series of discussions with members of the SDLP, including Messrs Haughey, Durkan and Farrell. They intended to reinforce these. Comment: Although Mr Donaldson did not say so specifically, I had the clear impression Mr Hume was an impediment to progress, and that Donaldson would have been happy to see him installed at Phoenix Park.

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4. We discussed Strands II and III. Jeffrey Donaldson was aware of the danger that unrealistic demands might be made of the Unionists in terms of North/South bodies. He said that he was not too concerned about this, provided sufficient emphasis was given to Strand III, so that North/South bodies would be subsumed in wider relationships. The changes now taking place throughout the UK were encouraging. It ought to be possible to devise a framework which acknowledged that far more united Britain and Ireland than divided them. The closeness of this relationship had been demonstrated by the reaction to the death of the Princess of Wales, witness the half-masting of Irish flags. A variety of existing and future links could be given greater prominence: between the regions of Britain and the two parts of Ireland; within International groups, including the EU, and possibly the Commonwealth, and various economic bodies. Other arrangements could be investigated.

5. In Donaldson's view, there was an urgent need for better understanding between the Unionists and the Irish Government. He did not believe the Irish Government had a coherent policy towards Northern Ireland. They tended simply to follow the line dictated by John Hume. Hume, in turn, was influenced by Adams and McGuinness. Donaldson believed the latter were serious in wanting to reach an agreement, but he felt that their influence over the rest of the Nationalist community was too strong. Comment: I am arranging a dinner at Glencairn for Mr Donaldson to meet Fianna Fail TDs.

6. In the course of my day there were some dissenting voices to this generally positive tone. Ed Curran, Editor of the Belfast Telegraph, was gloomy. He thought too much would be asked of the Unionists in terms of North/South bodies, and any agreement would unravel, just as it had in the 1970s.

7. Mr Brian O'Neill, whom I called on my way home, was also gloomy. He claimed to know senior figures in the IRA who had no intention of signing up to any agreement reached in Belfast. In his view, the only way to handle this problem would be to marginalise the men of violence by directing massive investment to the border area. He nevertheless shared Jeffrey Donaldson's view that more unites the two islands than divides them. He handed over four condolence books containing 6,000 signatures in memory of the Princess, pointing out that this represents about a fifth of the population of one of the most Republican towns in Ireland.

Comment

8. Increased confidence on the part of Ulster Unionists, as demonstrated by Donaldson, and that same evening by Trimble's reaction to Paisley's speech, must surely be a healthy development if it leads to a flexible and constructive approach on their part in the talks.

(SIGNED)

Veronica Sutherland
Ambassador

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