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FROM: D J R HILL
CPL DIVISION
22 NOVEMBER 1996

cc: Mr Thomas (L&B) - B
Mr Steele - B
Mr Stephens - B
Mr Leach - B
Mr Beeton - B
Ms Mapstone - B
Ms Bharucha - B
Mr Whysall (L&B) - B

Mr Perry - B

TALKS: THE DECOMMISSIONING DEBATE

As you know, the UUP, SDLP and Alliance Party are planning to hold a trilateral on Monday afternoon to try to identify a way forward on the handling of decommissioning. We understand that the UUP and SDLP at least have begun to draw up organograms showing the Independent Commission (initially in "inchoate" form), the (Liaison Committee, the paramilitaries, the Governments, the parties etc) and the relationships between them; and have set themselves, over the weekend, the task of drafting "Terms of Reference" for at least the Commission and the Committee.

2. The SDLP have a natural concern that the UUP will bid too high and begin to introduce prior commitments, schedules of decommissioning etc; but there may nevertheless be scope for a modest level of agreement on some aspects of the "mechanisms and procedures" for decommissioning. It is at least encouraging that the SDLP seem willing to explore the possibility of establishing an inchoate Commission to run in parallel with a Liaison Committee, although they are clear that this would only be possible alongside the launch of the three strands.

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3. Apart from giving you a little more background, the purpose of this minute is to invite you to let us know of any constraints on what is practically (or legislatively) possible which we should bear in mind as we get feedback on the trilateral discussions. Obviously we will pass on whatever information we glean about the parties' various proposals. I know you and your team are hard pressed at the moment and that attendance at Castle Buildings can be a fruitless exercise, but we would be delighted to see you there at any time and if we detect indications that it would be useful to have a SPOB representative on hand at a particular time we will of course let you know.

4. It may even get to the point (and this is floated in my "gameplan" for next week) that it would be helpful to offer "technical" advice and assistance to the parties engaged in the trilaterals - if, for example, they come up with some outline ideas or options which they would like to check out with us. In those circumstances we might well wish to seek to influence the parties in the direction of a workable arrangement, while leaving them with "ownership" of the developing product. An offer of a meeting with "technical experts", of the sort we had with the UUP in September, might be very appropriate. If (a big if) matters develop to that point, would you be willing to play such a role once more?

(signed)

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