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FROM THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

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cc PB

✓ BVP

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
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Pine Minute

John Holmes Esq
Private Secretary to the
Prime Minister
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Dear John

✓
Should be easy on the talks part.
They are v. confident and helpful.
But you will recall their wider
enthusiasm to reshape political
life in Northern Ireland and
their anxiety that we should be
preparing for the referendum
campaign now.

5 November 1997

John 5/11

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S
COALITION

The Prime Minister will meet members of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition tomorrow. The likely participants from the Coalition are **Monica McWilliams**, one of the two Talks delegates, a university Lecturer in Sociology, from a Catholic background; **Pearl Sagar**, the other delegate, a community activist from (Protestant) East Belfast; **Bronagh Hinds**, in many ways the power behind the Coalition throne, Principal of the Ulster People's College and holder of a wide range of other public appointments (a Catholic); Jane Wilde, a doctor and former head of the Health Promotion Agency in Northern Ireland; and Avila Kilmurray, Director of the Northern Ireland Voluntary Trust. Dr Mowlam will be there from the NIO.

The main objective in holding the meeting is to recognise the positive achievements and constructive outlook of the Coalition. The aim should largely be to listen, and offer encouragement. They may raise several particular points, covered in the lines to take attached.

Background. The Coalition was formed to contest the Talks elections held last year, specifically in response to the very low level of participation by women in Northern Ireland public life (the Coalition delegates are



sometimes the only women at all around the Talks table; the only ones apart from them who ever take a prominent role are the Secretary of State and the Irish Junior Minister, Liz O'Donnell). Given their lack of an established position, and their non-sectarian cross-community approach, their achievement of just over 1% of votes, more than some well-established parties, was rather impressive.

In the Talks, they have been entirely constructive, generally supportive of the Government, consistent advocates of Sinn Fein entry, and impatient of obstruction from Unionist parties. Their own positions are at times not well-defined, and they tend to major on economic and social issues, perhaps because of internal differences over constitutional ones. They are not key players in the process, and their influence on public opinion is currently limited. But as they grow in experience (few of them had much involvement in politics before the Coalition was formed) it may become greater, and is likely to be beneficial. They get on well with most parties in the Talks, and are hence well-informed about the way participants' minds are moving.

The Prime Minister should be aware of recent developments in the Talks. Strands One and Two have been racing through their agenda, and will reach the end of it next week. So far, parties have simply disclosed opening positions: there has been no real engagement, and certainly no sign of compromises being floated. The UUP are chiefly blamed for this. They continue their policy of ignoring Sinn Fein; they also assert (as they have always done) that business cannot be done in the full-scale talks format. They have argued for smaller groups: initially of the "larger parties", hence excluding Sinn Fein; recently, however, acknowledging that such groups might include everyone. The SDLP, meanwhile, have



been proposing a round of bilaterals in which the Chairmen of each Strand (HMG for Strand One, Senator Mitchell for Strand Two) would take an active mediation role. There is a developing recognition among talks participants that new formats more suited to horsetrading are needed. Later this month, therefore, the intention is that there should be, for each of Strands One and Two, one week of negotiations in intensive bilateral (or other informal) format. After that, in the week beginning 1 December, there has to be a Review Plenary, as required by the procedural motion passed in September. We need to work hard to achieve some degree of engagement by then: otherwise the plenary could become an arid stand-off with Unionists protesting at the lack of decommissioning, and nationalists at the lack of UUP engagement.

Yours
Daniel Kyle
for W K LINDSAY