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FROM: ROBERT TRAVIS
CONSTITUTIONAL & POLITICAL DIVISION
9 DECEMBER 1997

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

TALKS SUMMARY, 9 DECEMBER 1997

Summary

No advance for the moment on the key issues text. Sinn Fein continue to feel isolated; the Irish changed tack somewhat in response. In addition to the sub-group meeting there were bilaterals with the Irish, the Chairmen, Sinn Fein and Reg Empey(UUP).

In the morning there was a brief meeting with the Irish who were clearly influenced by their earlier meeting with Sinn Fein. They were anxious to find a way of meeting Sinn Fein concerns relating to the SDLP/UUP 'key issues' document. It was agreed that it was important to establish a sense of ownership amongst those parties not directly involved in the drafting of the document.

Sinn Fein (Gerry Adams) set out their objections to the SDLP/UUP text in a fairly measured way. There was general support for the two Governments' view that it would be desirable to reach broad consensus on the list of key issues, but little support for Sinn Fein's proposed changes.

The Irish Government began to explore possible formulations to meet Sinn Fein concerns (prompting David Trimble to remark privately later that the exercise had at least revealed who had weak knees), without success. Seamus Mallon broke a determined silence to express his irritation that the search for "common ownership" was being interpreted in a particular way; but offered to have a further bilateral with the UUP to find a way forward.

This produced a further concession from the UUP in the form of an agreement to refer under item 2 to the "nature and composition of any cross border institutions in Ireland". (There was private agreement between the UUP, the loyalist parties, the SDLP and Sinn Fein that "confidence issues" should be extended to refer to the list of CBMs agreed by the Liaison Sub Committee on CBMs at their meeting on 18 November, but that wasn't subsequently played in to the meeting.) This also failed to meet Sinn Fein's requirement that items 1 and 2 should be "symmetrical"; and they reiterated the case for references to "sovereignty" and to "equality issues".

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File
13/12
Pine Minister
This will give you
a flavour of
the latest talks,
and where Sinn
Fein are. The
cc as attached
text they are
talking about
is attached.
10/12

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Eventually the meeting broke up in some despondency with an agreement to meet again at 10.30 am on 10 December, probably for a round of bilateral and other discussions in the search for consensus. As a fall back, Seamus Mallon suggested that any list of key issues should be limited to the headings in bold type, with the relevant Chairmen charged to produce appendixes listing all the issues which parties wanted to raise under those headings. In the absence of agreement to his further proposal, Mr Trimble withdrew it.

Sinn Fein set out their objections to the SDLP/UUP text in a fairly measured way. There was general support for the two Governments' view but little support for Sinn Fein's proposed changes.

The Irish Government began to explore possible formulations to meet Sinn Fein concerns without success. The SDLP held another a further bilateral with the UUP to find a way forward. The result of which also failed to meet Sinn Fein's requirement. The meeting broke up in some despondency with an agreement to meet again at 10.30 am tomorrow.

We had a further meeting with the Irish to determine a wording that would placate Sinn Fein and be acceptable to the SDLP and UUP. Sinn Fein were later invited to join us in a trilateral.

Mr Adams and Mr McGuinness were the main contributors. Mr Adams declared himself exhausted, but the meeting was good humoured. They were clearly extremely anxious to reach an agreement on key issues. Mr Adams felt that Mr Mallon's suggestion was the best way forward.

Following this meeting we settled on a form of words with the Irish to be put to the UUP and SDLP by us and them respectively.

In the absence of Mr Trimble, a meeting was arranged with Mr Empey and junior colleagues. Mr Empey felt the joint document marked the limits of UUP compromise. If the document was to be revisited, then they too may have some amendments they would wish to make. He undertook to contact Mr Trimble and have a further meeting with Mr Murphy tomorrow.

(Signed)

ROBERT TRAVIS

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