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To: NO. 10

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FROM: D J R HILL
CONSTITUTIONAL & POLITICAL DIVISION
17 OCTOBER 1997

cc: (see attached)

PS/Mr Murphy (L&B)
PS/Secretary of State (L&B)

TALKS HANDLING PLAN: WEEK BEGINNING 20 OCTOBER

Objectives

These might be to:

- (a) bring out the sense that there is a basis for securing sufficient consensus within the talks behind a set of propositions on constitutional issues which would be acceptable to all parties except Sinn Féin;
- (b) get all participants to the point of being ready to table proposals on "the nature, form and extent" of new arrangements in each of the three strands, for discussion the following week.

Background

2. The Prime Minister's visit has reinforced the sense of momentum in the talks. The quality and range of the debate in strand two on Tuesday morning was very encouraging, including as it did the beginning of a constructive engagement between the UUP and SDLP on the criteria for Unionist acceptance of a North/South body. It also demonstrated that on the key issues Sinn Féin will be isolated from the Irish Government and SDLP, both of whom addressed the issues on the explicit assumption that there would be new political institutions in Northern Ireland.

3. Interesting as the debate was, there remained a clear desire to move on quickly down the agenda and get to a discussion of "structures" as soon as possible. Meanwhile participants agreed to table papers on "constitutional issues" in both strand one and strand two by today, for discussion next week. (There is a general desire to keep all three strands in step at this stage: the circulation of the two Governments' consultation paper on strand three issues, advertising "A New Agreement", will have contributed to that.)

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4. Strand two will meet on Monday, from 11.30; strand one on Tuesday, from 10 am; and the Business Committee on Wednesday morning. The two Governments have announced their readiness to convene a strand three liaison meeting in the light of advice from the Business Committee, but that probably means no such meeting until the week beginning 27 October.

5. Morale in the Unionist community is low, although probably not so bad as Mr Trimble says it is. (He is of course worried about the UUP's forthcoming party conference and Executive Committee meeting, at both of which he will come under a lot of pressure from senior dissidents.) Publication of the Parades Bill may not help, although it has been long signalled and the extended remit demonstrates the Government's readiness to tackle aggressive displays of the culture of each tradition. The positive tone of Wednesday's meeting with the DUP (and of Dr Paisley's comments to the press afterwards) may take some of the steam out of the DUP/UKUP anti-talks campaign. Meanwhile, on the fundamentals, the UUP have some solid gains to point to if only they were prepared to focus on them:

- last Tuesday's debate left Sinn Féin isolated in urging Irish unity. The Irish Government and SDLP presentations assumed the continuation of Northern Ireland's status as a part of the United Kingdom;
- the various papers on constitutional issues, especially HMG's should reinforce this point;
- the two Governments are formally consulting the other talks participants about the nature etc of a new Agreement.

6. The UUP continues, nevertheless, to focus on relatively trivial confidence building measures, most of which seem likely to have no significant effect or be counterproductive in their own terms; and which run the risk of creating equal (or greater) and opposite loss of confidence in the nationalist community.

Handling the week

7. A general discussion of constitutional issues, initially in strand two, ought to produce evidence of a broad consensus around the propositions reflected in the Downing Street Declaration and the Joint Framework Document, leaving Sinn Féin isolated. It would be worth seeking to bring this out, and we will provide a number of questions which the Secretary of State or Minister of State might use for that purpose.

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8. On the other hand, we probably don't want to push the debate to the point of an explicit formal understanding on the key constitutional questions because that could generate unhelpful pressures on the Republican leadership. The Irish Government and SDLP will probably share this concern and be keen to avoid confronting Sinn Féin with unpalatable constitutional realities at this stage; but they ought to stand by their public positions. In order to retain their support and avoid pushing the Republican Movement too far into a corner it will be important for HMG to stand by all the elements of the rounded position on constitutional issues which is set out in the Joint Framework Document, including

- acknowledgement of the right to Irish national self-determination, albeit on the basis of consent freely and concurrently given, North and South;
- commitment to introduce and support legislation to give effect to Irish unity if majority support for that emerges;
- readiness to change British constitutional legislation to reflect that;
- commitment to the "equality" agenda while Northern Ireland remains part of the UK.

9. The ideal outcome would be to reach a consensual position on constitutional issues in discussion, but without crystallising it; and then encourage participants to table their structural proposals in all three strands for initial consideration next week. (To this end we might encourage the Business Committee to schedule meetings of strands one and two on Monday 27 and Tuesday 28 October and a meeting of the strand three liaison arrangements on the morning of Wednesday 29 October.) Thereafter the pace may well need to slow down; it may become desirable to schedule particular weeks for meetings in each strand; and work might be devolved to smaller sub-groups, for ratification by the "plenaries" in each strand.

Press handling

10. Our public line should probably be that the talks participants are engaging seriously on the real issues, without going into detail; but it would be helpful to find ways of conveying the impression (if justified) that a consensus - based on the elements incorporated in the Joint Framework Document - had begun to emerge on the key constitutional issues, leaving Sinn Féin isolated. This would help Mr Trimble in the run up to the UUP Conference and Executive Committee meeting.

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Briefing meeting

11. It would be desirable to have at least half an hour to review the other parties' papers on constitutional issues and to go through the background briefing on this complex of issues before the strand two meeting begins at 11.30 am on Monday.

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**TALKS HANDLING PLAN
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PS/Mr Murphy (L&B)
PS/Mr Ingram (L&B)
PS/PUS (L&B)
PS/Mr Semple
Mr Thomas
Mr Steele
Mr Watkins
Mr Leach
Mr Bell
Mr Stephens
Mr Brooker
Mr Ferguson
Mr Perry
Mr Maccabe
Mr Beeton
Mr Priestly
Mr Woods (L&B)
Mr Whysall
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Ms Bharucha
Mr Warner
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Mr Holmes, No 10
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