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PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH LORD ALDERDICE: 22 JANUARY

This is to provide briefing for the Prime Minister's meeting with Lord Alderdice, leader of the Alliance Party, on Thursday 22 January. Lord Alderdice has requested this meeting and it is likely that the Prime Minister can expect a comfortable exchange of views given Lord Alderdice's strong support for the Propositions on Heads of Agreement.

It is likely that he will want to discuss a number of issues with the Prime Minister including:

- sharing with the Prime Minister his analysis of the current position within the talks including how greater momentum may be injected into the process and pressing for direct UUP engagement with Sinn Fein;
- hear directly from the Prime Minister how the Government envisages developing the Propositions on Heads of Agreement within the detailed negotiations in Castle Buildings and the Government's analysis of the prospects for a positive outcome to the negotiations;



- express his strong reservations about Dr Mowlam's meeting with the loyalist prisoners in the Maze Prison.

Lord Alderdice has been very positive about Propositions as it more or less reflects the balanced settlement advocated by the Alliance Party. It is likely that he will ask the Prime Minister to explain the background to Propositions and the way ahead particularly with regard to keeping Sinn Fein on board and tackling Unionist reservations about North-South bodies. The Prime Minister can also expect a lengthy statement of Lord Alderdice's analysis. In particular he may press for greater momentum to be injected into the negotiations at Castle Buildings as he believes that there is insufficient time between now and the May deadline, for the talks, to cover the detailed ground necessary to reach a settlement, particularly in relation to Strand One - new arrangements for the government of Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister may wish to respond to this concern by pointing out that he understands that this has been recognised by the talks' participants themselves and all have agreed to block out entire days for devotion to detailed negotiations in all three strands. While the Government is doing all that it can to facilitate the negotiations, including the preparation of a work plan and detailed papers to facilitate discussion, the pace will, however, be dictated by the parties.

In a telephone conversation with Lord Alderdice, in late December, the Prime Minister agreed to consider visiting the talks to help move negotiations forward. Should Lord Alderdice refer to this the Prime Minister may wish to respond that since their conversation progress has been made and that the parties now need to spend time exploring the Propositions and building ownership of them. However, he remains ready to consider active intervention whenever necessary and will be meeting the parties in London on 27 January.



Unlike some of the other smaller parties in the talks the Alliance Party has not been overly critical about the Prime Minister's discussions with Mr Trimble viewing these as acceptable as long as they proved to be beneficial to the overall process. In this context Lord Alderdice is likely to ask the Prime Minister to press Mr Trimble to engage directly with Sinn Fein in the talks. This has been a recurring theme of his based on his strongly held view that progress will only be possible through a process of fully inclusive dialogue involving all parties. In a speech to the Northern Ireland Forum on 16 January he said that he didn't think that such a meeting would convince Sinn Fein of the desirability of remaining within the UK but it would provide them with an injection of reality about the views of Unionists. The Prime Minister may wish to acknowledge the desirability of such a meeting but point out that while he can encourage Mr Trimble to meet Sinn Fein it is not possible for him to force such a meeting.

One negative note may arise from the Alliance Party's publicly expressed reservations about the wisdom of the Secretary of State's meeting with loyalist prisoners in the Maze Prison. In this vein Lord Alderdice has been a long-standing critic of paramilitary groups developing their role in the political process without evidence of them decommissioning their illegally held weapons. He may cite the Secretary of State's meeting with the loyalist prisoners as giving further legitimacy to the position of the paramilitaries within the community which he views as a slippery slope to anarchy. The Prime Minister may wish to stress that Dr Mowlam was not negotiating with the prisoners but simply ensuring that they were fully aware of the Government's talks policy and that her visit to the Maze was intended to provide stability within the community, at a time of rising violence, by facilitating a fully inclusive talks process involving all the parties including those which have links with the prisoners.

Lord Alderdice might also raise the position of the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) within the talks given that there is evidence to suggest that the UFF paramilitary group, associated



with the UDP, may have been involved in the recent violence. Lord Alderdice is aware of the procedure within the talks' rules for dealing with such allegations and the Prime Minister may wish to respond by advising that the British and Irish Governments will consider any firm evidence which implicates any of the parties as being in breach of the Mitchell Principles on non-violence.

Tactically the Prime Minister may wish to ensure that Lord Alderdice leaves the meeting believing that he is a key player in the talks process and that his serious concerns about the lack of time for detailed negotiations and Dr Mowlam's meeting with the loyalist prisoners are appreciated and have been taken on board. I have attached in the Annex some key points covering these issues for the Prime Minister to make to Lord Alderdice.

Yours
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