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QT/MR/309

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NORTHERN IRELAND SETTLEMENT: A NEW CHIMERA IS BORN?

Despite ugly appearances, we may be close to a settlement.

2. Beyond the turbulence in and about the process, the swirl of events and the blood on the streets, the narrow ground of the convergent agreement is now clearly visible. It requires the participants only to bridge the gap, if any, between Propositions and Frameworks. (Only?!)

3. Why so? Recent events have:

- confirmed that the SDLP and the Irish Government would settle for Frameworks

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- more surprisingly, the Propositions episode has shown that Sinn Féin would also settle for Frameworks, even though Adams told the Prime Minister he would seek to "negotiate up" from it. (We know that the Provisionals are themselves conscious of the paradox that Propositions has flushed them out to proclaim Frameworks as the touchstone.)

- the UUP, implicitly if not explicitly, would settle for Propositions, as would the Loyalist parties. ✓

4. How wide, then, is the gap between Frameworks and Propositions? In reality, very narrow. Here are some pointers:

- the Irish Government say the two documents are consistent, even though they now appear to regret their negotiating triumph on Propositions of a fortnight ago and re-emphasise their adherence to Frameworks;
- the British Government also says it remains committed to the positions in Frameworks, and claims there is no inconsistency with Propositions;
- the SDLP see no inconsistency;
- the Economist says Propositions are a one page summary of Frameworks.

5. Only Sinn Féin and the UUP unite in emphasising the difference between the two documents. Their political need to do so reflects, in the case of Sinn Féin, the way Propositions was produced, rather than its substance; and in the UUP case, the way the Frameworks was produced, rather than its substance. If

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they accepted the analysis of the Economist, there would be a deal or, or probably, they would reject both documents.

6. As the Prime Minister wisely observed, it is only a matter of language. The fact that the convergent ground is now in sight gives us a solid gain on which we could build, even if the Talks process stalls now.

7. The rational procedure (and therefore one difficult to achieve) is to put both Frameworks and Propositions on the table and negotiate in the space between them. (That is what the papers we have been working on with the Irish side would in effect do.) And it is from that area that, if the Talks process breaks down, we should derive the Proposals which:

- the two Governments could develop in bilateral consultations (Plan B)
- and, ultimately, test in parallel referendums.

8. It follows from the analysis above, I suggest, that HMG should say nothing, publicly or privately, to emphasise the distinctions between Frameworks and Propositions. If HMG is credibly seen as stepping back from Frameworks this will:

- both diminish the chances of securing a settlement, and
- give the IRA the pretext they lack for blaming HMG for the resumption of violence.

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9. Our objective should be to find Proposals, between Frameworks and Propositions, which each side can re-label as their own, preferably without any participant claiming a negotiating triumph.

10. So, slowly, the caterpillar crawls towards its metamorphosis.

(Signed)

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*This is actually
a friend assessment
but there is no
answer to para 5*

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