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5258
POLITICAL AFFAIR
17 DEC 1996
BELFAST

FROM: PETER SMYTH
POLITICAL AFFAIRS BRANCH
16 DECEMBER 1996

cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B
PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) - B
PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B
PS/Malcolm Moss (DHSS, DOE & L) - B
PS/Baroness Denton (DED, DANI & L) - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Sir David Fell - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Steele - B
Mr Leach - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Stephens - B
Mr Wood (B&L) - B
Mr Beeton - B
Mr Brooker - B
Mr Hill (B&L) - B
Mr Lavery - B
Mr Maccabe - B | File
Mr Perry - B
Mr Priestly -- B
Ms Bharucha - B
Ms Mapstone - B
Mr Whysall (B&L) - B
Ms Collins, Cab Off (via IPL) - B
Mr Dickinson, TAU - B
Mr Lamont, RID FCO - B
HMA Dublin - B
Mr Jones, HO (via IPL) - B
Mr Westmacott (via RID) - B
Mr Campbell-Bannerman - B
Mrs McNally (B&L) - B
Mr Holmes, No 10

C 18/12

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

TALKS SUMMARY: 16 DECEMBER 1996

A depressing day which saw the UUP wriggling to get off the hook represented by the decommissioning paper agreed last Wednesday with the SDLP and Alliance. In the morning, the Secretary of State, Senator Mitchell and General de Chastelain reported on various conversations which had taken place with UUP members over the weekend, all of them pointing in the direction of the Party seeking

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JC/TALKS/2952

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to resile from the apparently forward position reached last week. In a meeting with the Chairmen and the Irish side it was agreed that the possibility of resolving the decommissioning issue before Christmas was now remote; but that adjournment of the Plenary until Wednesday, to allow bilaterals to take place, probably represented the best way forward in these unpropitious circumstances.

In the Plenary, McCartney complained that the small parties were becoming marginalised as the two Governments made common cause with the UUP, SDLP and Alliance, in pursuit of an alternative agenda designed to procure the entry of Sinn Fein into the Talks process. In such circumstances, he warned, the UKUP and DUP would walk out, and the UUP would crumble under pressure from the Unionist community. He complained, too, that the UUP were failing in their duty to the pro-Union position by failing to clear their lines with other Unionist parties before negotiating with the SDLP. Cedric Wilson and Peter Robinson backed this up by alleging that focussing attention on the UUP/SDLP/Alliance paper represented an attempt to resolve agenda item 2(c) before 2(a) and (b) had been properly discussed. Allegations were also made about responsibility for press leaks over the weekend. Mallon put down an ominous marker that SDLP patience was not inexhaustible, and that his Party's attitude towards continued discussions after Christmas would be influenced by developments over the next few days. A rather uneasy UUP delegation (Trimble, Taylor and Empey) were not particularly convincing in rebutting these various charges. Adjourning the plenary until Wednesday morning at 11.00am, the Chairman suggested that all parties should engage in bilaterals; and stated that he and his colleagues would do so with a view to possibly tabling proposals under Rule 30(a).

In the afternoon, a UUP delegation (Maginnis, Donaldson and Kerr) met the Secretary of State and Michael Ancram. The opportunity was used by the Unionists to put across a number of depressing messages - considerable differences on key issues with the SDLP, so no prospect of wrapping up decommissioning before Christmas; continuing

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distrust of the Government's likely interpretation of terms of entry for Sinn Fein; insistence on the handing up of a preliminary tranche of arms before Sinn Fein can be admitted to Strand talks, plus a scheduled agenda of developments thereafter. Even more depressing, these proposals appeared to be made with a full appreciation of their negative effect on the Talks process. Although the delegation announced their intention of continuing dialogue with the SDLP, it was difficult to envisage how any meaningful progress could be made. This, in conjunction with Mallon's earlier warning, underscored the sense of depression.

Reporting this to the Independent Chairmen, British officials found it difficult to disagree with Senator Mitchell's assessment that no significant progress could be expected at least until the General Election and the NI Local Government elections were out of the way in May 97. They noted his proposal (already agreed to by the Irish and the SDLP) for an adjournment of the Plenary until 27 January, with the proviso that bilaterals might be undertaken at any time from 13 January. The need for a short statement from the Chairmen to close the session was also recognised.

(Signed)

PETER SMYTH

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