

RESTRICTED: POLICY

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cc Mr Thomas
Mr Stephens
Mr Bell
Mr Watkins
Mr Wood (LTD)
Mr Maccabe
Mr Haney

MR HILL

cc Mrs McNally (B&L)

Gameplan

Jim H.

NO AGREEMENT NEXT WEEK: WHAT TO DO

1. You asked for ideas about our line if the talks fail to progress to the end of the opening plenary next week
2. We should first want to consider whether to **seek to press on beyond Wednesday** into Thursday, Friday or even the beginning of the following week. That would no doubt be very unpopular; it would however be consistent with our determination to press on and explore every opportunity. Whether we seek to do so would depend chiefly on whether there was a real prospect of a breakthrough; also to some degree on availability of Chairmen and Ministers. We might at least want to be seen to be making the offer.
3. If not, what to do? As we discussed, it is hardly the time to **mothball the talks till the election**: we shall scarcely be able to say next week that there is *no* prospect of further advance before the election; it would not anyway accord well with our line that they are the only game in town; it would leave a vacuum; the removal of any prospect of being involved in political activity before the election might encourage a PIRA blitz (perhaps followed by a pre-election ceasefire); it might also remove one more constraint on the loyalist paramilitaries. (We should also have the prospect of the forum meeting for several weeks, perhaps in truculent mood, until a suspension order could be approved and made).
4. **When, then, should talks resume?** The decision is presumably formally for the Chairman (rule 20) but he will no doubt take account of the views of participants, and especially the Governments.
5. Our general line principle of determination to make progress points to an early date. On the other hand, there may be some advantage in giving delegates a rest. And remaining prospects of getting Sinn Féin in may depend on talks *not* being in session - at any rate in full session - for a period.
6. **6 January** may see a number of people on holiday (though I understand the Forum meets on 10 January). **13 and 20 January** have both been canvassed: Michael Ancram, I believe, favours the latter, hesitating over 13 January because Parliament returns that day.

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7. It may be difficult to persuade other participants that we should delay any resumption longer than that – it might seem rather too obviously to be associated with the entry of Sinn Féin, it is difficult to defend in itself if we really believe in talks, and the Forum will be in session, without talks – in principle an undesirable state of affairs.
8. One possible compromise would be for the **talks to resume in bilateral format** for several weeks (the plenary to be adjourned, presumably, at the call of the chair). That could amount to *de facto* parity of treatment for Sinn Féin: if PIRA had observed a ceasefire for a period of weeks, they too might be entitled to ministerial bilaterals. It might also be logical in itself, whether the talks are still stalled on decommissioning, or whether they have moved on: in the first case, bilateral discussion would presumably continue to be the sensible way of seeking compromise; in the second, soundings would be needed about the order in which to take business – perhaps in the Business Committee, to whose constitution the SDLP would presumably then agree – and then time would be needed to permit preparation for discussion.
9. We might need to make some sort of **statement**, or anyway have available a public line, if we fail to reach agreement. Unless we conclude that the breach is irreparable, I imagine we should not want to suggest the failure to reach agreement is a major set-back: our interest remains in keeping the show on the road. Perhaps something along the lines of:

There had been grounds for hope in recent days that we should have been able to arrive at a resolution of the decommissioning before the Christmas break, and it is a disappointment that we have not been able to do so. We shall have to return to the issue after the New Year break. Nevertheless, progress unquestionably has been made recently, and I hope that all involved will reflect during the break on new ways forward in the light of it. The Government remain determined to do all possible in the New Year to take the talks process forward

PS/Secretary

PS/Michael A

TALKS: INFLUENCING THE IRISH

I have already submitted advice that we should try to have a word with Mr Trimble before he leaves for any event before the end of the year. The following is a series of points which might be used in the light of the US Administration's decision to prepare the ground for a successful determination of the talks before Christmas.

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