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ASSISTANT SECRETARY  
SECURITY POLICY & OPERATIONS 1

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FROM: J McKERVILL  
Political Affairs Division  
26 November 1996

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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 Priestly - B  
Mr Hill (B&L) - B  
Mr Lavery - B  
Mr Maccabe - B  
Mr Perry - 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 Westmacott (via RID) - B  
Mr Campbell-Bannerman - B  
Mrs McNally (B&L) - B

cc (A)

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

TALKS: TUESDAY 26 NOVEMBER 1996

The day began slowly, although a number of bilaterals with the Irish, Alliance Party, PUP, and SDLP coupled with a meeting between Mr Thomas and Mr O hUiginn on Hume/Adams (recorded separately) ensured a reasonably busy afternoon.

2. Michael Ancram, who led the British delegation in the absence of the Secretary of State in Finland, took the opportunity of the quiet morning to brief Senator Mitchell and General de Chastelain on the Hume/Adams initiative. He reported that the responses so far

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received from both Hume and the Irish had been measured and that the Government was planning publication of HMG's text on Thursday. The Chairmen gave no indication either way that they had received any similar briefing from the Irish side.

3. At 12.05 the Irish delegation led by Minister Coveney joined the British delegation for a meeting. Reviewing the possible outline for the day, **Michael Ancram** said that he would be meeting both the Alliance Party and the SDLP later to receive accounts of the trilateral meeting with the UUP held the previous day. Initial informal contacts had suggested that the trilateral had gone reasonably well. The parties were inching forwards although it was far from clear that any eventual agreement between them could be reached. He envisaged that the three parties would, at the next day's plenary, seek a further adjournment of plenary. Both delegations agreed to support any such adjournment.

4. In a brief reference to Hume/Adams, **Minister Coveney** suggested that delegations were marking time waiting for movement "on other things". Did we still expect the Prime Minister to say something later in the week on Hume/Adams? In reply **Michael Ancram** said that given the hype created by Martin McGuinness and John Hume at the end of last week, the British Government was under strong pressure to say something, although he reported that no decision had been taken. Discussion then quickly reverted to the discussions between the parties on decommissioning.

5. **Mr Coveney** surmised that the talks process would be much easier if on the one hand Unionists and Loyalists and, on the other the SDLP and Sinn Fein had common cause. Unfortunately that was not the case because of Unionist opposition to the Loyalists. **Michael Ancram** corrected this view stating that the UUP were not against the Loyalists. They had kept stressing the need for "mutual" decommissioning. He explained that the main Unionist fear was that a ceasefire would be called and Sinn Fein parachuted in without mechanisms on decommissioning in place. The UUP proposals were unacceptable to others. Equally, the British Government's proposals

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would not take the trick. The essential task was to square these two papers. How could we convince the Unionists that decommissioning would happen? **David Cooney**, in reply, suggested that without decommissioning there would be no final agreement coming out of the talks. Unionists would not have the confidence to move forward to final agreement but Sinn Fein, if talks were proceeding to an agreement, would, he predicted, come under pressure not just from Unionists but also from Nationalists to bring about decommissioning. The British side should not merely assume that the SDLP would be in agreement with Sinn Fein on that.

6. Discussion then turned to the latest British Government proposals on the role of an International Commission with the Irish finally beginning to give some signals that they believed it not to be the poisonous sword that they had previously presented it to be. **David Donoghue**, in particular, wondered about the possibility of giving the Commission political antennae but not going as far as giving it a role in judging when decommissioning should start. The identification of personnel for the Commission, and the degree to which they were "political" and acceptable to Republicans, might in the Irish view be an avenue to explore further.

7. The meeting ended with an inconclusive discussion on a suggestion from **Mr Coveney** that a constructive way forward might be to isolate the problem areas from those issues which could be agreed more easily. There may, in addition, be a role for the Chairmen in facilitating the identification of areas of agreement. The Irish undertook to give the matter further thought.

8. At the meeting with the Alliance Party which began at 12.35, initial attempts by **Michael Ancram** to turn the discussion towards the previous day's trilateral meeting failed as the Alliance delegation persisted in pursuing whether the Prime Minister would be making a statement on Hume/Adams later in the week. The **Minister** responded that no date for a statement had been planned, but there would likely come a time when something needed to be said. That might be reasonably soon although honestly, he could say that no timetable had

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been decided. He reasserted that there had been no negotiation with Sinn Fein. Anything that might be said would make it clear that the British Government were responding to points raised by others and would be a reassertion of Government policy. **Seamus Close** described Hume/Adams as a spectre hanging over the talks process: the fear and suspicion which the initiative caused could permeate into the discussions they were having on the mechanics of decommissioning. The **Minister** merely agreed that it would be helpful to get it out of the way.

9. **Mr Close** then reported on the previous day's trilateral meeting which, he said, had concentrated on the mechanics of decommissioning rather than the target. He believed that the fact that the meeting had taken place at all was positive. He believed there was a desire to make progress amongst the three parties although it was too early to say whether agreement could eventually be reached. The parties had drawn out a number of headings to work through. The key, he believed, was the linkage between agreement on the mechanics of decommissioning and the immediate launch of the three stranded process. Both the Alliance and the SDLP were trying to bring the UUP into agreement on that, although again it was too early to determine the UUP's true intent. Encouraging, however, was the fact that the other two parties had produced heavyweight delegates.

10. At this stage, **Mr McBride** wondered how equipped the British Government was to move forward if the UUP, SDLP and Alliance came up with agreement on the mechanics of appointing a core-Commission. **Mr Hill** suggested that while much would depend on the terms of reference, he believed that the appointment of a Commission could be processed quickly. **Mr McBride** said this was important as Unionists would look for something quickly to be put in place. The meeting ended with the Alliance Party describing their big anxiety as being whether the UUP would ever be able to deal with Sinn Fein coming into the talks process, particularly in advance of an election. **The Minister** agreed that this was a key question: he was not sure if the UUP would be able to break away from the DUP and UKUP in such circumstances. What was clear however was that the UUP's proposals

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for prior decommissioning before Sinn Fein could enter the three stranded negotiations would not wash.

11. Immediately after lunch **David Ervine** led a six man PUP delegation to see the Minister. **Mr Ervine** opened the meeting by saying that his party were struggling to give an analysis, because they did not know what was going on. He believed the talks were running into difficulties. While a deal on the mechanics of decommissioning could possibly be reached, he believed the difficulty was the entry requirements being put down by the UUP. In response, **Michael Ancram** said that what the UUP had set out, particularly the requirement for a prior tranche of weapons to be handed in, was inconsistent with the Mitchell report and would not wash. What was required was an exit strategy that would achieve sufficient consensus. If prior decommissioning remained their bottom line, progress would not be made. **Mr Ervine** said he hoped to explore this later that day in a bilateral with the UUP.

12. Responding to a question about Hume/Adams, **the Minister** said that the Government was not in negotiation with Sinn Fein. What had been said to others was consistent with what the Government had said in public. The British Government had been told that a reassertion of its position could produce a restoration of the ceasefire although it was surprised that this alone would be enough. No date for the publication of a response by the Prime Minister had been decided upon. **Mr Ervine** reacted by saying that he was reasonably comfortable with all that on the basis that he believed the British Government's room for manoeuvre in any event was extremely limited. He was more concerned about another rumour that was circulating, namely that the talks would move into recess in mid December and then dissolve into bilaterals until the elections. **Michael Ancram** assured him that this was not the British Government's position.

13. Discussion then turned to the UUP's position in the run up to an election and whether it would be possible for them to break away from the DUP and UKUP. The PUP view was that this was very unlikely although they regretted Trimble's lack of confidence and constructive

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leadership. Trimble's difficulties would be compounded by the DUP starting their election campaign at this weekend's party conference. The discussion ended with a plea from the PUP that they should not be taken for granted and that the Government should attach the same importance to their views as to those of others. They should not be ignored, as much to do with the continuation of the Loyalist ceasefire depended on the analysis which they were able to give others outside.

14. During the meeting the PUP raised two specific issues in the prisons and education fields. These have been recorded separately.

15. At about 2.55, an SDLP delegation led by Mr Mallon called on the Minister. They reported on their trilateral meeting with the UUP and Alliance. It had been called to clarify issues dealt with the previous week. It had lasted about an hour, and was mildly positive. But it had concentrated on modalities: it had not touched on the major dispute over prior decommissioning. A further meeting would be held, at a time to be arranged: and participants would therefore support a further adjournment at the plenary on Wednesday. The SDLP had resisted Mr Maginnis' urgings that the party should invite the Governments to start establishing a Commission: the SDLP's firm line was that all the mechanisms should be introduced together along with the launch of strands. **Mr Mallon** said that the SDLP would not trade aspects of the mechanisms against the Unionists' demand for an initial tranche of decommissioning, which was a clear non-runner. Frustration and doubt was expressed about the Unionists' approach. **Mr Mallon** spoke of a "terrible degree of unreality", and the absence of any serious attempt by them to "grapple with the politics".

16. **Michael Ancram** sought to encourage the SDLP's efforts. There were indications that Unionists did want to get into the strands, but were deeply mistrustful of the Governments, hence their belt and braces approach. It was better that a solution emerged in discussion between the parties, rather than being suggested by the Governments. The idea of an inchoate Commission was likely to be a part of any way through.



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17. Mr Mallon asked how the Minister saw the talks developing until Christmas. He was clearly reluctant to see the party remaining in the same process week after week: they were, he said, being put in the same boat as the people who were stalling it. Michael Ancram agreed that at some stage a proposition would have to be put to the Talks: the present situation could not go on for ever. We might hope to be in substantive negotiations by Christmas, but much depended on what was going on outside.

18. Discussion turned to the election. Mr Mallon favoured one being held immediately. Dr Hendron in some agitation made clear that he did not: he wanted one as late as possible, if he were to have a chance of winning. He therefore favoured May 1, the more so when reminded it was the Feast of St Joseph!

(Signed)

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