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FROM: D J R HILL
POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT TEAM
22 NOVEMBER 1996

cc: PS/Sir John Wheeler (L&B) - B
PS/PUS (L&B) - B
PS/Sir David Fell - B
Mr Thomas (L&B) - B
Mr Steele - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Leach - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Stephens - B
Mr Wood (L&B) - B
Mr Lavery - B
Mr Perry - B
Mr Maccabe - B
Mr Beeton - B
Mr Priestly - B
Mr Cornick - B
Mr Whysall (L&B) - B
Mr Campbell-Bannerman - B
Ms Mapstone - B
Ms Bharucha - B
Mr Lamont, RID - B
HMA Dublin - B
Mr Clarke, Dublin - B
Mr Westmacott, W'ton via RID - B
Mr Oakden, No 10 - B
Ms Collins, Cab Off (via IPL) - B

1 Jack
2 Jeff
20/11

PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - B
PS/Michael Ancram (L&B) - B

TALKS: GAMEPLAN FOR WEEK BEGINNING 25 NOVEMBER

Objectives

These might be to:

- keep the decommissioning debate going at relatively low intensity without forcing it to a conclusion;
- prepare to feed in our detailed proposals, initially with the UUP, at the appropriate juncture;

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- promote a resolution of the "Hume/Adams" initiative and of the issue of the terms on which Sinn Fein might join the talks process, by securing the transmission of a reasonable statement of our position to Sinn Fein via the Irish Government/John Hume;
- engage with the Irish on possible endgame strategies with a view to convincing them that
 - it is at least as important to maintain a viable talks process as it is to secure a ceasefire
 - it would be desirable for the two Governments to offer a compromise outcome to the decommissioning debate, possibly on the lines of our paper of 14 November
- bolster public confidence in the Government's approach to the talks by taking opportunities to convey a balanced series of key messages.

Background

2. The UUP, SDLP and Alliance Party are planning to meet at 2.45 pm on Monday to take forward work on the "mechanisms and procedures" of decommissioning. The UUP and SDLP have begun to draw up organograms and have set themselves the task of drafting possible terms of reference for a Commission and Committee.

3. This is potentially valuable as a means of identifying areas of agreement at a relatively modest level. The SDLP's readiness to engage despite their doubts about UUP good faith (and, implicitly, to move away from the emphasis on the Committee as reflected in the two Governments' "suggested conclusions" of 1 October) is encouraging.

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4. Trilateral discussions on these lines could perhaps begin to identify a way through the decommissioning debate, although that is unlikely. In any event they are likely to take some time to make progress. The UUP have already acknowledged to the SDLP that they do not wish to bring the decommissioning debate to a head next week because that could give the DUP a stick to beat them with at the DUP conference the following weekend. A further motive is probably that the UUP want to play the decommissioning debate long, until they see a public statement from HMG on the terms on which Sinn Fein might be invited to join the talks.

5. Mr Trimble's reasonably positive reaction to HMG's proposals on terms of entry for Sinn Fein is very encouraging. The decision, [endorsed by NI], to send a final revise of the "Hume/Adams text" to the Taoiseach today and John Hume tomorrow is the necessary preliminary to bringing this nexus of issues to a head. The possibility of an official level meeting with Sinn Fein has been acknowledged but a decision deferred until next week - by which time Sinn Fein should have our text and a meeting could be either academic or valuable in helping to bring the initiative to a successful conclusion.

6. Meanwhile there is a general impression that the talks are faltering, particularly on the issue of decommissioning, and widespread Unionist concern about alleged coded exchanges and "secret deals" between the Government and Sinn Fein. Some of this has been fed by the Loyalist parties. We understand that they are pleased with the coverage of the political message they wanted to convey to the Prime Minister and are now planning to seek a quadrilateral with the SDLP and UUP to press them to find a way through the decommissioning issue, an approach which they might subsequently publicise.

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Overall approach

7. The situation is pretty bleak but HMG is moving into a stronger position. We have reasonable compromise positions on "Hume/Adams" and on the handling of decommissioning in the talks although neither has yet been fully deployed, which leaves us vulnerable in any endgame. Public information about the Government's policies is dominated by speculation and misrepresentation, leading to an erosion of confidence in the Government's political development strategy.

8. The various issues raised by the "Hume/Adams text" and the decommissioning debate are intertwined like a medieval caduceus. The UUP will almost certainly refuse to shift their position on decommissioning until the Government has announced the terms for Sinn Fein's entry to the talks and the "Hume/Adams initiative" has been brought to a conclusion; the Irish will almost certainly refuse to shift their position on the handling of decommissioning in case it affects the prospects for a ceasefire. We have virtually no leverage on the UUP, who would need to be very courageous to adjust their position in current circumstances; and our leverage on the Irish Government is small for so long as they hold to the analysis that, given a choice, it would be better to try to secure a ceasefire than to keep the talks process going.

9. This analysis seems to point to the following conclusions:

- we cannot significantly influence the decommissioning debate without Irish Government support which is unlikely to be forthcoming in present circumstances. In any event, the UUP is unlikely to welcome, or respond to, any initiative next week or until HMG has made its public statement on terms of entry for Sinn Fein;
- the UUP/SDLP/Alliance Party trilateral discussions (which may engage the Loyalist parties too) offer a means of keeping the debate going, albeit at relatively low level.

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It would be a pity to choke off this modest development of interparty co-operation by inserting new proposals of our own before that initiative has run its course (which may not take long);

- HMG's main priority should be to push "Hume/Adams" to a conclusion by securing the communication of reasonable terms of entry to Sinn Fein, which aim to strike the balance between retaining the good will of the Irish Government/SDLP and that of the UUP;
- thereafter we could consider whether the time is right to float in with the UUP our detailed proposals on the handling of decommissioning;
- meanwhile we should take opportunities at Ministerial and official level to challenge the underlying Irish analysis and convince them that the objective should be to secure a ceasefire on terms which stand a chance of preserving the talks process. Additionally we should continue to urge on them the political/presentational advantages (which Mr Coveney seemed to acknowledge) of the two Governments tabling a compromise exit strategy to the decommissioning debate;
- it would be desirable to take whatever opportunities are available to tackle widespread misconceptions of the Government's position, especially among ordinary Unionists but also specifically within Loyalist and Republican circles;
- overall, we should at least aim to ensure that our reasonable compromise positions on "Hume/Adams"/terms of entry and the handling of decommissioning are promulgated before any breakdown, so that HMG is left on neutral and morally high ground.

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Detailed handling

10. Senator Mitchell will be back on Monday and has asked to see the two Governments at 11 am. There are a number of issues to cover:

(a) he may have news about his future role which could open up the distribution of Chairmanship roles in a way which might prove helpful in the decommissioning debate. (If a substitute for Senator Mitchell could take on the chairmanship of the plenary and strand two, General de Chastelain could be dedicated to decommissioning.) As to the timing of Senator Mitchell's departure, if that is what is in prospect, it would be nice to bring the opening plenary to a conclusion before Christmas and we should work to achieve that, but at present that seems unlikely;

(b) he may want further information about Dr Paisley's allegations against Martha Pope, which may of course be raised in the subsequent plenary;

(c) he will want the two Governments' views on the week's business. He will be encouraged by news of the UUP/SDLP/Alliance Party trilateral and it should be possible to persuade him that the best course is to let that process run, until at least Wednesday;

(d) we should warn him of the possibility that certain remarks by David Nichol (UDP) about recent UDA activity in Londonderry could trigger a Rule 29 complaint from the DUP or UKUP. (The ensuing process would not of course prevent any of the activities suggested in paragraph 9 above from going ahead, and would provide a further reason for having no plenaries).

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11. At the noon plenary we could support any proposal to adjourn until at least Wednesday, and possibly the following Monday. We may need to deal with the DUP allegation against Martha Pope and DUP/UKUP complaints against the UDP.

12. For the rest of the week we might

- keep in touch with the development of the UUP/SDLP/Alliance Party exchanges;
- stand ready to offer support as necessary, eg "technical" advice on the legal and practical implications of what may be proposed; and prepare to feed in our detailed proposals at the appropriate juncture;
- concentrate on bringing the "Hume/Adams" text/terms of entry nexus of issues to a head;
- keep hammering away at the Irish Government's underlying analysis and their reluctance to promote a sensible compromise outcome to the decommissioning debate.

Public Presentation

13. Speculation about the prospects for a ceasefire, the Government's "dealings" with Sinn Fein and the fate of the talks may be at an even higher pitch next week following Sinn Fein's Meath conference and the briefing and counterbriefing which we can expect all sides to engage in over the weekend. It would be highly desirable to find and take opportunities to set out the Government's overall analysis, challenge the main misconceptions of Government policy and reassure those audiences which are most jumpy at present. The draft Newsletter article which I submitted on 20 November and the draft speech which Mr Watkins has prepared would both fit the bill.

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From: John McKervill
Political Affairs Division
1996

INT 21/96

Briefing meeting

14. I understand it would be convenient for the briefing meeting to commence at about 9.45 am at Castle Buildings after a planned meeting with Mr Trimble and Mr Mallon on education matters. I will be available on the Minister's arrival for a quick word on all of the above.

(signed)

D J R HILL
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NOTE FOR THE RECORD

1. Mr. David P. (B&L) - B
2. Mr. David P. (B&L) - B
3. Mr. Thomas (B&L) - B
4. Mr. Steele - B
5. Mr. Leach - B
6. Mr. Bell - B
7. Mr. Watkins - B
8. Mr. Stephens - B
9. Mr. Wood (B&L) - B
10. Mr. Beeson - B
11. Mr. Priestly - B
12. Mr. Hill (B&L) - B
13. Mr. Lavery - B
14. Mr. Maccabe - B
15. Mr. Perry - B
16. Mr. Bharucha - B
17. Mr. Kapstone - B
18. Mr. Whysall (B&L) - B
19. Ms Collins, Cab Off (via IPL) - B
20. Mr. Dickinson, TAN - B
21. Mr. Lamont, RID VCO - B
22. HMA Dublin - B
23. Mr. Westmacott (via RID) - B
24. Mr. Campbell-Bannerman - B
25. Mrs. McNally (B&L) - B

TALKS: 20 NOVEMBER 1996

Summary

A relatively quiet day with only two bilaterals, both with the SDLP, and a meeting with the Independent Chairman and the Irish Government. The DUP announced that they would not be free to see the Government team. Most of the day was spent preparing for that evening's Intergovernmental Conference meeting and with the Secretary of State returning to London for meetings at No 10.