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Date: 26 November, 1996

cc PS/Sir David Fell  
Mr Steele  
Mr Thomas (B&L)  
Mr Bell  
Mr Stephens  
Mr Watkins  
Mr Maccabe  
Mr Perry  
Mrs Mapstone  
Mrs McNally (B&L)

- 257  
B  
N. Hume  
A. Whysall - a  
v. Hume  
M. Hume for M. Hume
1. MR HILL [Agreed with amendments 27/11]
  2. PS/PUS (B&L)

**PUS' MEETING WITH MR BLAIR AND DR MOWLAM: TALKS**

1. This is to provide briefing on political development and talks matters for PUS' meeting with Mr Blair and Dr Mowlam, as requested in your note of 20 November.
2. Labour policy has moved on significantly with the arrival of Mr Blair and Dr Mowlam. Unity by consent remains the party's official policy, but has been heavily played down. The old policy of being a 'persuader' for a united Ireland has been dropped, though the party has said that the status quo is not an option, in the absence of consent on the part of nationalists. Labour have said they would continue to see through the "peace process" on the basis of the Joint Declaration and the Framework document, which Dr Mowlam has said 'include' Labour's policies. On a day to day basis, Labour have been generally supportive of the Government's efforts, as evidenced again at the Secretary of State's meeting with Dr Mowlam on 14 November.
3. Mr Blair in his Conference speech (separately to you only (A)) undertook to make Northern Ireland a high priority, and was fairly hard on Sinn Féin. Also coming to you, for reference, are extracts from Dr Mowlam's speech (B), her interview in the Belfast Telegraph of 2 September (C), and her letter in The Independent of 19 October (D).

4. Mr Blair and Dr Mowlam will no doubt want to hear something of the current position in the talks; but also impressions of where the talks process is likely to go in advance of an election. I attach brief lines.

(Signed)

A J Whysall

- installation of Senator Mitchell and colleagues;
- rules of procedure (comprehensive, fair and balanced, providing open agenda and enshrining the important notion of "sufficient consensus");
- agreement on the agenda for the rest of the opening plenary;
- contingent consensus on the agendas for the three strands;
- serious and substantive discussion in plenary and bilateral mode on the key issue of decommissioning;
- many substantive issues touched on during the discussion of "procedural" issues - reciprocal assurances sent and received;
- ongoing informal contact and acclimatisation. Irish Government presence and role no longer an issue;
- Talks still have a lot going for them
  - excellent Chairmen. Robust and effective rules of procedure;
  - potential to address all the relevant political issues. Maximises scope for trade offs;
  - engages both Governments and (potentially) the whole spectrum of political opinion in Northern Ireland.

## PUS'S MEETING WITH MR BLAIR AND DR MOWLAM

### Key Messages

- Solid achievements in the Talks
  - installation of Senator Mitchell and colleagues;
  - rules of procedure (comprehensive, fair and balanced, providing open agenda and enshrining the important notion of "sufficient consensus");
  - agreement on the agenda for the rest of the opening plenary;
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■ Problems

- the tensions arising over the issue of Sinn Féin's entry;
- the handling of decommissioning in the talks;

- UUP fears of being outflanked by the DUP and UKUP;
- the shadow of the general election.

■ Parties' Positions

- The UUP, under pressure within the party, from the DUP and UKUP, and their own community, have retreated to the position of demanding a tranche of decommissioning before Sinn Féin move into substantive political talks. This is not Mitchell, and not deliverable. Their real position is probably that they would prefer not to see Sinn Féin enter at any price, though they do not say so in terms. They are engaged in discussions with the SDLP about modalities of decommissioning, but not pushing for progress, until the outcome of Hume/Adams is known.
- Having invested more capital in the talks than other unionist parties, they have an interest in progress before an election. They have compromised in the past in order to keep the talks in being: but so long as the prospect of Sinn Féin entry remains, it is not easy to see them getting over the decommissioning hurdle.
- The SDLP have also invested heavily in the talks, and are extremely anxious - all the more after Drumcree - for results before an election, in which they strongly fear Sinn Féin advance. They grow increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress in the talks. It

must be doubtful how long they would wish to remain in them with no prospect of progress, though they show no immediate signs of wishing to go. They signed up to our October compromise on decommissioning. They can go little further, however; they cannot agree anything on decommissioning that would appear as a barrier to Sinn Féin entry.

- We have stayed close to the Irish. They are similarly placed to the SDLP - if anything rather more anxious to avoid any obstacles for Sinn Féin. They have told us recently in terms that they would, given the choice, prefer a ceasefire to the maintenance of the talks. This seems to us to be based on a flawed analysis: if the talks collapse, much of the attraction for them of a ceasefire is lost: it is hard to see it lasting without a talks process.
- The DUP and UKUP have operated an informal coalition, with a high profile, 'no surrender', line - Mr McCartney has more or less avowed a wish to block a process he regards as corrupt, though Mr Robinson at least would like to get down to real politics. The Loyalist parties have played a constructive role, in the talks and with the paramilitary groups: we have given what support we could, including two meetings with the Prime Minister. Alliance have been helpful over decommissioning, though Lord Alderdice's analysis is now that the prospect of Sinn Féin participation is a 'fantasy' whose pursuit is damaging. The Women's Coalition and the Northern Ireland Labour grouping have been entirely constructive, but little heeded by other participants.
- The forum has turned into a platform for unionist causes, and scrutiny of government: but has at least not sought to take on the 'directing' role over negotiations earlier feared: it counts for little, especially with the SDLP out.



### ■ Likely future developments

- general recognition that talks will need to be suspended before the election;
- the timing and circumstances of any suspension will be influenced by outcome of Hume/Adams and the prospects for reaching agreement on the handling of decommissioning. An acrimonious break up in the near future cannot be ruled out. We would obviously prefer a "soft landing" which would maximise the chances of picking the project up after the election;
- an incoming Government would be free, in co-operation with the Irish, to reactivate the Forum and reconvene the Talks. [Irish General election - due by the Autumn may also be a factor, but further talks before the Summer break might be feasible and desirable.]
- the outcome of the intra-Unionist and intra-nationalist electoral contests could also affect the prospects for talks: a good showing by the UUP and SDLP would be helpful, but further gains by either Sinn Fein or the DUP could create difficulties;
- with electoral considerations out of the way there may be a better chance of making progress than for some time - with or without Sinn Fein.

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### Background: Decommissioning

The two Governments stand by the essential concept of the Mitchell report - that decommissioning of paramilitary weapons is most likely to emerge from a dynamic process of engagement on political issues during which the political and moral pressures on the paramilitaries to engage in at least some decommissioning would become intense. It seems clear that unless there is at least a start to a process of decommissioning during the talks, there will - if Sinn Fein is involved - be no settlement.

The Unionists, however, are nervous of proceeding on this basis (and alive to the tactical advantage that there needs to be agreement on the handling of decommissioning before the end of the opening plenary and the launch of the substantive three-stranded political negotiations). The UUP in particular are hostage to the harder-line DUP/UKUP position and fear the electoral consequences of moving into substantive talks without at least some reassurance that there really will be some decommissioning during the talks.

They have sought: enactment of the legislation and establishment or designation of the proposed Independent Commission, as evidence of something practical happening on decommissioning. They have also sought to tie down the arrangements for decommissioning before the end of the opening plenary and to require a first tranche of IRA decommissioning before Sinn Fein could join substantive talks. These requirements are inconsistent with Mitchell and the Government has told the UUP they are undeliverable - not least because the Irish Government and SDLP will refuse anything which reduces the chance of an IRA ceasefire and Sinn Fein seeking to join the talks.

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agreement to any such Committee would leave them exposed to criticism from the DUP and UKUP. They cannot afford to get into a position in which they might be expected to engage in substantive political discussions with Sinn Fein with no undertakings of any sort on decommissioning and the issue being dealt with in a Committee subject to veto by either Government or the SDLP.

We are still seeking a way through and have put some proposals to the Irish Government for raising the profile of the Independent Commission. Meanwhile the UUP, SDLP and Alliance Party are doing some useful low-level work on the remits and relationship between any Liaison Committee and the Independent Commission. By itself this is unlikely to produce a way round the impasse but it could be a useful contribution and may generate greater mutual confidence and a sense of joint ownership.

All the force and energy I have will be bent towards it.

We have been responsible in our actions over the peace process from the outset. We will continue to be so now.

And I say this to Sinn Fein and with what has happened in the last 24 hours to loyalists groups as well, you have your chance to take the path of peace.

It is your duty to take it as members of the human race. However it is and you shall play your part.

Fail in that duty and I swear to you the search for justice and reconciliations will carry on without you.

The choice is yours".