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SECURE FAX NO. 1141

21 November 1996

NO. OF PAGES: 3

TO: HQ
FOR: Second Secretary O hUiginn

FROM: Belfast
FROM: Joint Secretary

Subj: Conversation with Peter Bell

1. The British side have been unable so far to brief us on the Prime Minister's meeting with the Loyalist parties yesterday, as a note has yet to come through from No. 10.
2. Reviewing the political discussion at last night's IGC, Peter Bell tells me that the Secretary of State found his exchanges with the Tánaiste very valuable, even if the conclusions to be drawn from them were fairly dispiriting.
3. On the flight back to London, there was further discussion on the British side of the point made by Ancram and Chilcot about the improbability of the IRA going for a ceasefire if there was no talks process to enter when this happened. Some felt that our very bleak assessment of the prospects for the talks process contrasted with the relatively more sanguine view which we were taking of the prospects for a ceasefire. The British perspective is that these two issues are intimately linked and that the latter will not happen without the former.
4. I rehearsed for Bell the points we made last night in response to this line of argument. I suggested that the priority for both Governments should be to do everything possible to achieve a ceasefire. Both Governments were committed to an inclusive process, as we had again made clear in last night's communique. The present limited opportunity to secure a ceasefire and Sinn Féin's entry to the talks should be worked to the full.
5. A Unionist walk-out from the talks, I recognised, would create very serious difficulties, which we did not in any way underestimate, but it should not in itself mean the end of the process. What mattered for Sinn Féin, as we had emphasised

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last night, was that they would be treated on equal terms with all other participants and that there would be a continuing process of some kind. It was not to be assumed that Sinn Féin would abandon all interest in the process because a number of the other participants were likely to be absent from it for an initial period. Perceived equality of treatment within a democratic talks process which was continuing in however partial a form would weigh very heavily with them.

6. In response, Bell said that, in the British view, a ceasefire which removed key players from the talks process would destroy the latter and, for this reason, would not ultimately be sustainable by the Republican movement. They did not regard a ceasefire predicated on an assumption of "meaningful negotiations" as capable of lasting for very long if these negotiations were demonstrably not taking place. Furthermore, the British Government would find a talks process from which the Unionists were absent extremely difficult to sustain politically.
7. On decommissioning, I suggested that undue significance was being read by the British Government into the willingness of one of the UUP's various teams to explore with the SDLP possible remits for the committee and the Commission. While this was a potentially useful exercise, it did not of itself provide the fundamental reassurances needed about UUP intentions in relation to reaching agreement with others on the handling of decommissioning and the transition to three-stranded talks. Bell accepted that his Ministers were "plucking at straws" yesterday.
8. On the British Government's own proposal of last week, Bell said that, as we would have detected last night, his Ministers were not insisting on this model and no other. The strength of our reaction had registered with them and the Tánaiste had been very cogent on this subject last night. It remained the case, however, that the joint paper of 1 October would not run with the Unionists. If the talks were to collapse shortly, the British Government would wish to be able to show that they had not adhered blindly to a position which they knew to be unacceptable to one of the key protagonists but were exploring possible alternatives which might win support. The Secretary of State's concern was to have a position which he could defend as reasonable in the event of a collapse. He regarded last week's British paper as one such position but was open to other suggestions.
9. I emphasised that, as the two Governments had again agreed last night, the Mitchell

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Report had to be our road-map through decommissioning. The paper of 1 October was firmly grounded in Mitchell whereas last week's paper was not. The British proposal, as far as we could judge, was "running" with nobody.

10. In further discussion, I suggested that the British should abandon this proposal and join us on the firm ground of Mitchell, in or around the 1 October paper. This was an eminently reasonable position which was consistent with all previous joint proposals and could, therefore, be readily defended in the event of a collapse. What could not be defended as reasonable, however, would be a proposal which attempted to reintroduce a peremptory approach to decommissioning - first presented in the Washington Three precondition and, we had hoped, long overtaken by the British Government's commitment to the Mitchell Report.
11. Bell reiterated that his Ministers felt a need to move off the 1 October position, even if the particular model put forward in last week's paper was not adopted. They wanted to maintain a joint approach and hoped that we would reflect on the points made by the Secretary of State last night and see whether some movement was possible. Ultimately, he hinted, they would probably wish to present ideas on their own behalf even if we did not support these.
12. I reminded Bell that the Commission would have to be agreed and established by both Governments and that this would require the closest possible cooperation. I suggested that the British Government should reflect very carefully on the consequences of launching a unilateral initiative, unsupported by the Mitchell Report and motivated by obvious partisan considerations, which we would feel obliged to disown.