

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL



Ref: BO.2645

1. SIR RICHARD WILSON
2. MR HOLMES

cc Mr Sanderson

HANDLING NORTHERN IRELAND

We spoke yesterday about ways to handle the climax in the present Talks and how the Cabinet Office could contribute to this (my minute of 12 February - attached - also refers). Despite the increasing pressures on the Prime Minister and yourself, you remained confident that, at least for the moment, action should remain largely in No 10, with close support from the NIO. In these circumstances, any attempt by the Cabinet Office to be more active would be unlikely to add value and might lead only to delay and/or confusion. I agreed, noting (as in the past Sir R Wilson has commented) that provided the Prime Minister and you are able to carry this water, then that must be the best way forward.

2. The difficulty of active intervention by the Cabinet Office in this fast-moving negotiation was further demonstrated this week. Towards the end of yesterday I received a copy of an undated minute to the Prime Minister by Dr Mowlam, asking for approval by lunch-time yesterday of her proposals for a new Commission on Policing. I understand that by now the Home Secretary has also commented, but it is not clear whether you have endorsed these ideas on behalf of the Prime Minister. Were there still time to offer advice, I have the following comments (largely from Mr Sanderson):

- It must be sensible to get policing off the immediate agenda of the Talks and the Commission idea would do this effectively.
- We have some doubts about a Royal Commission. This could provide an excuse for the Republicans not to co-operate or to rubbish its conclusions. And a

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

Royal Commission would need, on past precedent, a longer time-scale.

- We doubt whether the terms of reference for a Commission should be made too radical. The objective surely ought to be a return to normal policing and criminal justice, not the invention of a new kind of policing sui generis for Northern Ireland.

3. All that said, I should add one broader comment about the role of the Cabinet Office. Under the previous Government the Secretariat clearly had an important role to play in supporting the relevant Ministerial Committee, which was needed in order to tie a number of Ministers with personal doubts about the policy into the then Prime Minister's approach. This is, happily, no longer necessary; my impression is that the Cabinet as a whole and certainly a strong majority in it are content with the approach taken by the Prime Minister and Dr Mowlam, and will support a successful agreement - points of disagreement or contention relate to Departmental concerns which do not affect the main thrust of the negotiating strategy. To that extent, it has not been necessary to have more than the minimum number (one) of IN meetings over the past 9 months, plus a handful of ad hoc discussions between Ministers.

4. Nonetheless, the time may well be approaching when a full-scale IN discussion of the emerging outcome from the talks will be necessary. I see from a record available today of the Liaison Group meeting on 20 March that the Irish are holding a full-scale all-day Cabinet meeting this week of their own to consider the likely outcome. With our objective of concluding the Talks by 9 April still on track, and no Cabinet planned for the week before Easter, it seems that the only moment left for Ministerial discussion in London will be Cabinet on 2 April. Arguably, we should be planning an IN

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

meeting, at least, in the week beginning 6 April; and a rehearsal to Cabinet the previous week of the likely results of the end-game which is now beginning.

M Pakenham

MICHAEL PAKENHAM

24 March 1998

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