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Mr. Apaty
Andr. Dawson
Annexes A1 #5
29/4
29/4

IMMEDIATE

SECURE FAX NO. 502

29 April 1992

TO: HQ FROM: BELFAST Pages: 2
FOR: A/Sec O hUiginn FROM: Deputy Joint Secretary

Political Talks: First Day

1. Alston telephoned me shortly before 3 p.m. to give me an account of today's proceedings. I have faxed to you two short press releases he provided to me, the first an opening statement by the Secretary of State, the second an agreed joint press statement issued over lunch.

2. The Plenary began with a short statement by the Secretary of State in which he indicated his determination to carry the process forward. It then heard a report from the Business Committee meeting of 9 March which reviewed the procedures to be followed in future meetings, i.e. location, number of people allowed per delegation in rooms, agreed time table (Monday-Wednesday of each week).

3. There then followed a brief discussion of the Gap. The Unionist side expressed the desire that the arrangements be as flexible as possible and that there should be provision for "injury time". The Secretary of State, in response, stuck to the language of Monday's communique and was not further pressed on the question of an extension.

4. Each Party Leader then made a short presentation, which Alston summed up as follows:

- (a) Aderdice: The talks process should move from the "good basis for talks" which was reached last year to the "good basis for the governance of Northern Ireland".
- (b) Hume: The problem of relationships was broader than within Northern Ireland alone and this had to be addressed.
- (c) Cunningham: (In substitution for Molyneaux.) Predictably referred to the political and constitutional debate taking place elsewhere in Britain and stressed that any agreement here would have to be workable, durable and compatible (though not necessarily identical) with constitutional developments elsewhere in Britain.
- (d) Paisley: Stressed that these were new talks in which there was to be a search for an alternative to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and that they were about settling the future political governance of Northern Ireland within the Union. Paisley went on to criticise the Minister's remarks at Monday's Press Conference in which he spoke of two agendas.

5. The Secretary of State then summed up that they had probably exhausted whatever could be achieved in Plenary today and announced that the Business Committee would meet from 3 p.m. onwards and again on Monday, 1 May (the Bank Holiday). The Plenary will meet again on Tuesday next at which time he hoped it would get down to discuss matters of substance. Later he described to officials his view of the tone of the meeting as being "brisk, business-like, realistic".

6. I asked Alston about the paper in circulation and whether he would provide me with a copy. He presumed that I was speaking about an up-dated version of the paper entitled "Realities and Common Themes" which had first been circulated at the end of last year's talks. That paper had now been revised to take account of the final position of Parties last year and attempted to pull the threads together so that there could be a bridge from last year's discussion to substantive discussion in this year's talks. He informed me that he had no authorisation to provide me with a copy of this paper, observing wryly that this was a matter which he had discussed with us last week (i.e. our access to documents of Strand 1) and he was sure it would be discussed at Friday's meeting.

7. Alston told me that another paper will be distributed imminently to participants in the talks, prepared by the Government and which attempted to provide a basis for moving the talks onward. This paper would review the options for new political institutions within Northern Ireland.

8. Alston did not anticipate telephoning me after the Business Committee had met unless there was a dramatic development at the meeting.