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TO : HQ

FROM : BELFAST

FOR : A/Sec O hUiginn

FROM : Joint Secretary

cc (Secure Fax) PST-NY

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30/9*

Mayhew Interview in Belfast Telegraph

1. Following our discussion earlier this evening, I spoke to Martin Williams and registered serious concern about the Secretary of State's interview in this evening's Belfast Telegraph. The interview is full of problems but I made the following points in particular:-

- The interview is very pro-Unionist and one-sided; the Secretary of State concentrates on a Unionist view of the constitutional issues; he makes no mention of any Nationalist perspective; he seems to rule out saying that Britain has no longterm interest in staying in Northern Ireland;
- He justifies Unionist reluctance to get back to talks until further concessions are made on Articles 2 and 3; he does not mention the Government's position as set out in the Programme for Government and in repeated statements and comments by the Taoiseach and Tánaiste; at one point he says "the Unionist parties cannot signal what they are prepared to compromise on within Northern Ireland until they know what the Irish are prepared to do on Articles 2 and 3";
- He gives the impression that the only thing the Governments are talking about is Articles 2 and 3;
- He suggests that all the participants agree that if there is to be any chance of progress the British Government must be in the centre as the pivot, conducting bilateral talks;
- He goes further in relation to the future development of the talks than we believe we have agreed, i.e. "I think we have moved away from this round the table business";
- He goes into quite a lot of detail about a possible settlement, ruling out a revision of the Government of Ireland Act and joint "control" (although the agreed basis for the talks is that everything may be discussed including constitutional issues); the only elements of a settlement apparently in his mind are Articles 2 and 3 and devolution;
- His answer to a question on a Government statement on the talks creates doubt in our mind about the nature of the work we are beginning in the Liaison Group (he refers to a focus and direction document "along these lines", ie, the lines he has set out in the interview);

- We are not certain what the Secretary of State means by his quoted comments on transfer of Local Government powers; is he speaking of an alternative or an addition to devolution?
- Lastly, when he is asked about the Unionist view of the talks as proof of a pan-nationalist front (sic), he does not take the opportunity to deplore the use of that term to justify attacks on nationalist politicians, as we would have hoped.

2. The Belfast Telegraph has a frontpage story about the interview in which they describe him as ruling out the supposed main proposal in the Hume/Adams talks that the British Government should recognise the right to self-determination of the Irish people as a whole ("Mayhew says no"). You will have seen that the BBC carried a similar a report today and that the Irish Times carried it yesterday in an article by Frank Millar. The Secretary of State's phrasing here, however, is careful and could be said to leave some options open ("I'm not going to offer interpretations of language that other people have used. They are the people to ask about that. What I will say is that I am not prepared to contemplate any change to the status of Northern Ireland that does not represent the self-determination of the people living in Northern Ireland"). He has also been saying to Paisley's fury, and says again in this interview that if we give him something from Hume/Adams, he will look at it with interest although it remains to be seen whether he will be impressed.

3. Martin Williams said the printed interview was not the full text, some things were omitted, others conflated and there were some slight misquotes. He did not suggest, however, that the report of the interview was seriously wrong. Williams mentioned among other things that

- the Secretary of State refuses White's offer to describe himself as a Unionist;
- a reference to the links between the three Strands is not carried in the report; neither is a passage where he refers to the importance of any arrangements carrying the support of the minority community; he confirms a role for Dublin;
- He says that the Irish Government have shown a "realistic" understanding of the importance of Articles 2 and 3 which is an abridged version of comments indicating satisfaction with the Irish Government's position;
- He does not say, as White quotes him, that the Government of Ireland Act will not be revised;
- His comment about "joint control" is a reference back to his Liverpool speech (about which we complained here); he told White that anything could be discussed at the talks before going on to say that whatever comes out had to be capable of carrying broad agreement and that "joint control" would not;
- The final piece on local government is a garbled conflation of answers to two separate questions about local government and devolution.

4. Williams said he was surprised that I should express serious concern and asked if, in the light of his clarifications, I wished to moderate that view. I said I did not. Some of the points he had made were helpful and I would report them. However, we had to deal with the interview as printed. It was open to the British to correct it but it did not appear that White had got his shortened account badly wrong. In reply, Williams reminded me that the Secretary of State was addressing the largely Unionist readership of the Belfast Telegraph.

Comment

5. The Secretary of State has been careful in the last few days in the difficult situation following the Hume/Adams statement not to give hostages to fortune, for which he deserves credit. This interview, however, allowing for the readership and Williams' clarifications, is remarkably one-sided. He does nothing to prepare his audience for concessions they will have to make (as the Taoiseach and Tanaiste have been doing on our side) and encourages them rather to expect a limited internal settlement and a change in Articles 2 and 3. There is no mention of North/South institutions or suggestion of a balancing constitutional statement by the British (rather the reverse). As the Belfast Telegraph puts it in an accompanying editorial: "Everything he said - emphasising the importance of Articles 2 and 3 to the peace process and ruling out joint authority - suggests that the next step towards a settlement will be modest ones". As I reported last week, we have reason to believe that this is also the impression the Secretary of State has been putting across in private contacts with the Unionist community.