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S.H. 16.12.94

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cc 135

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(2)

Mr. Donoghue

16 **SECURE FAX** 1088

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9 December 1994

Pages: 3

TO: HQ

FROM: BELFAST

FOR: A/Sec O hUiginn

FROM: Joint Secretary

NIO Meeting with Sinn Fein

To confirm:

1. I raised the question of briefing arrangements this week. Williams was reticent. He said it would depend first on the agreements reached with Sinn Fein and the loyalists about confidentiality. Second, he indicated again that the British see a pattern of passing on of information on our part to others, including the press. We have pointed out of course that they have not been saintly on their side and that the relationship between the two Governments, which it is vital to maintain, has been strained by the unilateral and unnotified decision by the British to publish their own paper on internal structures at the same time as the framework document. We urged the importance of frankness on their part in relation to these talks.

2. Notwithstanding his reservations, Williams gave a summary briefing this afternoon.

3. Today's first meeting with Sinn Fein began shortly after 10.30 am and finished at 1.30 pm approximately. Opening statements were read and tabled. These have been released to the press. We have faxed both statements to you.

Main Topics of Discussion

4. Discussion ranged around the statements and procedure. There is no formal agenda or programme of work, but the statements are regarded as having set each side's interests and priorities. The British majored on weapons, as signalled at several points in their statement. It is not mentioned explicitly in the SF statement which refers simply to demilitarisation and other issues. Their other priorities (para 4) are democratic rights for all Irish people, Nationalist and Unionist, and political and constitutional change.

5. SF drew a distinction between themselves and the IRA, as expected, but did not say discussion of the arms issue would be impossible.

6. SF dwelt on parity of esteem which the British barely mentioned in their statement (one reference on page 19). They did not come with a shopping list but did raise the issue of

funding for the Meanscoil. The British explained their policy. SF had no proposals other than to say that the policy should be changed so that the right decision could be made.

7. The SF introduction says the speedy release of political prisoners would greatly assist the peace process. Presumably it was mentioned at the meeting but Williams did not know.

#### Procedure and Publicity

8. SF wanted meetings at least once a fortnight. The next will be on 19 December. Publicity was an important issue for them. They stressed the need for openness and transparency but acknowledged that some matters would need to be kept in confidence. They propose to give press conferences or briefings after every session. The British intend to brief also, but probably in a fairly minimal way (Unionist sensitivities again). In his letter of invitation, Thomas offered a means of contact between sessions.

#### British Team

9. We heard informally this week that the British team is Quentin Thomas, Stephen Leach, David Watkins, Jonathan Stephens, Chris MacCabe and Tony Beeton. Watkins will take the economic, social cultural brief (which, as I have mentioned previously, shows that the British expected Sinn Fein to have proposals in this area). Jonathan Stephens is Assistant Secretary in Thomas's political department. Chris MacCabe is the main NIO contact man and reports to Williams. Tony Beeton will be the note taker. He is a former private secretary to John Chilcot. The interesting appointment is Stephen Leach who is English, but married to a Blennerhassett from Kerry and keen to stay in Ireland. He transferred to the Department of Finance and Personnel about a year ago in order to avoid a posting to London. He has previous experience on the security side and will take that brief. He will also coordinate the British side. Leach has been given temporary promotion to Undersecretary level.

#### Worries of British Team members

10. In somewhat reluctantly confirming the names of the officials assisting Quentin Thomas, Williams said the British side were anxious to keep names out of the press and were already worried by the profiles of Thomas that have appeared. They were particularly concerned about people who live locally and might well be subject to threats or abuse. In response to a SF request today that they publish the names of their team, Thomas declined and referred to their anxieties. They would be grateful if we would keep the names in confidence. This reticence is not putting off the press. I note that UTV news is showing old film of Thomas and Chilcot this evening (taken at the end of a meeting in Iveagh House).

11. The British will ring changes in their team for the loyalist talks. Williams said the names had not yet been decided, but I have heard informally that Leach will be a member and will coordinate the British side for those talks also.

#### Balance of British Team

12. Some care has been taken about the balance of the British team for the SF talks. The British recognise that SF will want to be seen to talk to London, not to local officials (McGuinness boasted yesterday that a Bogsider will have no fear in dealing with people from Kent and Surrey or Oxford and Cambridge - he was playing to his own followers and to the press which has been building up a dramatically satisfying contrast between the "cerebral", Cambridge-educated Quentin Thomas and the street fighter from the Bogside.)

13. The appearance of Sinn Fein talking to London officials causes resentment and some apprehension among Northern civil servants, which has been voiced informally but directly to us this week. The inclusion of Watkins and McCabe should be seen partly against that background.

14. Incidentally, the British also hoped to keep the venue for the talks at Parliament Building, Stormont, in confidence, in deference to Unionist sensitivity about the use of this landmark in Belfast, site of the old Stormont Parliament and Administration. Their hope was always going to be vain; it was publicly known yesterday and in case there should be any doubt in anyone's mind, Sinn Fein arrived today in a black taxi from their headquarters in West Belfast and took care to be photographed entering Stormont estate and proceeding up the long drive! They were also photographed outside the Building in a manner reminiscent of photographs of Irish Ministers in 1992. Nonetheless, Williams took comfort in the fact that, although SF took care to issue their opening statement as from Stormont, the statement refers to Stormont Castle rather than Parliament Building (a common confusion; the Castle was site of the Stormont Cabinet and is now the offices of Ministers and senior officials).

#### Sinn Fein Team

15. The British were not surprised by the SF team of which they were notified just before names were released to the press yesterday. They expected representatives from the South and the inclusion of someone like Gerry Kelly. They thought the inclusion of two women was deliberate, in line with Adams' desire to project a modern, egalitarian image.

16. There has been a reaction to the Southern representatives among loyalists, particularly to McManus on the grounds that he is an elected Councillor. Gary McMichael has been making noises that he will not attend their meeting with the British on 15 December in protest.

END