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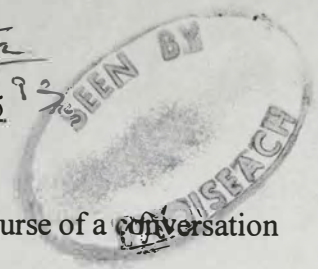
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Confidential

Conversation with Mark Durkan, 4 December 1995

By Mairead
Do see please
JH 8/12

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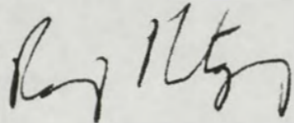
I called on Durkan at John Hume's constituency office in Derry. In the course of a conversation about the present political situation, the following principal points emerged:

- The post-Clinton mood of euphoria would dissipate fast, which made it important to register rapid progress in political discussions. Nevertheless, he felt that the optimism and energy created by the visit would make it hard for either Sinn Féin or the Unionists to adopt unduly negative stances in the coming weeks..
- Parties were, however, rather unsure of where they stood and he thus expected quite an amount of caution, the repetition of established formulae, and requests for clarification: "If you know nothing about cars, to give the impression that you do you spend a lot of time kicking the tyres."
- In his view, it would be difficult for the SDLP to argue convincingly against the principle of elections, whatever about the question of a body. It would not want to give the impression that it was afraid. To suggest that elections would seriously damage the peace process was to ignore the fact that general and local elections would occur before too long in any case.
- He admitted that at present his relaxed view was not widely shared in the party. But he thought that much of the opposition was not well thought out, or related to an emotional rejection of "Stormont by the back door".
- The concept of "electoral indexation" could be used to determine the size of party delegations to talks, or alternatively to assist in the determination of whether "sufficient consensus" existed - though he cautioned against the establishment of a hard- and -fast yardstick by which the latter might be measured. It should be more a question of judgement and circumstance.

- He mentioned that Nigel Warner, Mo Mowlam's adviser, had telephoned him to discuss the idea of electoral indexation [Comment: It appeared in a statement by Mowlam issued the same day.]
- He would like to see elections held on the basis of some variant of the list system. This would help the SDLP to maximise its vote, in particular vis-a-vis Sinn Féin. It would also not provoke speculation about a future pact with Sinn Féin inasmuch as the elections would differ markedly from the Westminster model and individual constituencies would not be involved.
- He was surprised by the rather hasty and ill-thought out nature of the Alliance proposals. Not only were there large gaps, in particular relating to North/South issues, but the very fact that Alliance had come out so firmly in favour of an elected body reduced their credibility as a go-between in the forthcoming preliminary talks - a role which he thought they would have been eager to fulfil.
- Unionist thinking too was far from clear. At a meeting he and Jonathan Stephenson had had the previous week with Jeffrey Donaldson and Drew Nelson, there seemed to be quite a gap between their views of what an Assembly would do, with Donaldson sticking to Trimble's line that it should serve to build confidence through routine discussion rather than acting as a negotiating body. Durkan was also puzzled by the publication last week of the UUP's Statement of Aims, which advanced a more integrationist line but to the publicisation of which no particular effort had been devoted.
- We spoke in advance of the meeting between the SDLP and the UUP which was held that afternoon. Durkan said that in his view the one danger of seeking to work together on socio-economic matters was that it could conceivably be used to bolster the Unionist case that a more structured venue for discussions of this kind could play a valuable role in building confidence.
- Durkan agreed that the 1991 Talks Statement would have to be re-visited. A new

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version would have to draw heavily from the Joint Declaration and the Framework Document. He felt that the importation into the talks of some independent element, as in 1992, would be desirable, not least because it could offer cover for the determination of whether sufficient consensus or widespread agreement existed on particular points.



Rory Montgomery

6 December 1995

cc PST; PSS; Second Secretary; Joint Secretary; Messrs Teahon, Donlon, Murray and Dalton; Counsellors A-I; Ambassadors London, Washington. ✓