



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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18 January 1996

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**WHITE HOUSE DISCUSSIONS**

Dear Secretary

1. I had a meeting this morning, lasting an hour and twenty minutes, with the National Security Advisor, Tony Lake, and his Deputy, Nancy Soderberg. The meeting focused almost exclusively on the International Body's report and on how to take the political process forward in the light of its forthcoming publication.

**Handling of Report**

2. Both Lake and Soderberg emphasised the importance of an agreed London/Dublin reaction to the report, and I brought them up to date on the discussions between both sides in pursuit of this. The ideal clearly would be if all the parties could accept the report, and the political process could then be moved forward quickly. However, the White House was particularly worried about the possible reaction of the Unionists and Sinn Féin, and also of the British. In the circumstances, Soderberg wondered about the value of a governmental response which might, albeit unsatisfactory in many ways, pre-empt a rejection of the Mitchell findings by some of the parties. Such a reaction might be along the lines that the Body had just reported on highly complex and sensitive issues which now needed to be given the most serious and careful consideration. Apart from their own detailed consideration in Dublin and

London, the two governments would be having intensive discussions on all the issues involved with the parties in the political track over the coming weeks. In short, Soderberg said that the governments would in this way be sending a signal to all sides (a) "to shut-up" and not deliver knee-jerk reactions to the report, and (b) that as the two tracks were "related and had to be married", it would not be appropriate to comment on the substance of the report until the political track had been appropriately advanced. The White House could then echo what the two governments had said.

3. Such a joint reaction, they believed, might also best be made public on Monday or Tuesday given (a) that it was known the report was being given to both governments on Monday and (b) that it was hard to envisage it not leaking between Monday and the formal publication on Wednesday. I made the point that, until we had a clear sense of the substance of the report, it was very difficult to decide on how best to handle it. The priority also must be to move the process forward at the earliest date.
4. In order to help ensure a smooth landing for the report, Lake said he intended to make a number of telephone calls in the coming days, including to the Tánaiste and some of the Party Leaders in the North. (I subsequently passed on a suitable timing for a call to be made to the Tánaiste). He again emphasised his view of the importance of the two governments having a common reaction ready as soon as possible, and he suggested that we might get together on Monday evening for a further review of the situation.
5. It is interesting that, at one stage in the discussion, Lake suggested it might have been a mistake not to have dovetailed the timing of the International Body's report with the outcome of the political track given the read across between the two and, in this



context, the possible potential for balancing concessions and compromises between them.

**Substance of Report**

6. I have little doubt but that Senator Mitchell is keeping Lake well informed of the progress of the work of the Body. Both men seem, for instance, to have spoken on the phone on a number of occasions recently; Soderberg also mentioned casually that she presumed each of the Members would give an advance copy of the report to his own Authorities.
7. Lake, understandably however, gave little away about what he thought the Report might contain, though at one stage he seemed to hint at the possibility of it embracing a range of options to address the concerns of the different parties. He and Soderberg went on to speculate on the kinds of quid pro quo that might need to be offered to the British and the Unionists in return for (the presumed) dropping of Washington 3. (All this, I should emphasise, was against a background where both unambiguously accepted that the Washington 3 requirement was a major mistake). In the above context Lake, in addition to the relevant parties unambiguously signing up to the principle of non-violence, seemed attracted to the idea of some degree of decommissioning once the talks got under way. I emphasised the importance of not adding further preconditions to the process - as against encouraging all sides to engage in confidence building measures in the light of progress in the talks, and indeed in order to facilitate and advance further such progress.
8. Lake and Soderberg also touched on the consent principle. They clearly saw the difficulty all these issues created for Sinn Féin and wondered what concessions in the

security area the British might be prepared to consider in order to make the package more palatable to the party. Overall, however, they felt that, if at the end of the twin-track process, the two governments could announce a definite and early date for all-party talks, this would allow Adams significantly more room for manoeuvre.

### Elections

9. Lake and Soderberg spent some time discussing the Unionist proposal for an elected body, which they clearly consider to be an irritating distraction. Lake considered the recent Trimble letter to the Tánaiste (which I had given to the White House) to be quite depressing, but wondered if it represented his real position. Soderberg added that, in her view, Trimble realised what was required but was not prepared to move at this time; significantly, he had said to the President in Belfast that he "needed more time".
  
10. While the Assembly/Convention idea was making the whole situation much more complex, the reality was that it had to be addressed. We all needed, therefore, to look again at the proposal to see if it could be turned positively around in some way. Soderberg suggested that one possibility might be to have an election/referendum on which parties people wished to represent them in negotiations. An alternative might be to launch talks and announce elections to an Assembly with minimum powers; this could then exist alongside the ongoing talks process, in a sense being a public dimension to it. Overall, and while the exercise of turning the Trimble idea into something positive was painful and frustrating, we needed to sustain the effort if the Unionist Leader was to be brought to the table. We have (to use a golfing term) to play the ball where it lies.



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11. Lake and Soderberg also said they welcomed Trimble's forthcoming visit to Washington (11-15 February); they would clearly use the opportunity, and that of Lake's envisaged telephone call to him in the coming days, to urge Trimble to take a much more open and positive attitude to the talks process. Lake made the point also that, given the balance of power in Westminster at present and the likely electoral outcome there, Tony Blair probably had more potential influence on Trimble at this time than anyone else, should he choose to use it (or be asked to do so).

### Visits

12. Lake and Soderberg are looking forward to the Tánaiste's visit, and to having a comprehensive discussion at that time. They would recommend to the President that he receive the Tánaiste. Soderberg also mentioned that Michael Ancram would be in Washington on the 29th/30th January, while Rod Lyne from the British Prime Minister's Office was scheduled to be here on the 26th January to introduce his successor.

Yours sincerely



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Ambassador

Seán Ó hUiginn Uas  
Secretary  
Anglo-Irish Division  
Department of Foreign Affairs