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650/1

RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH
BÉAL FEIRSTE

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT
BELFAST

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PSM; PSS; Messrs. Teahon, Mansergh & Dalton; Ambassadors London & Washington; Joint Secretary; Counsellors A-I

1 July 1997

Mr Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Second Secretary

Conversation with John Chilcot (1)

Sir John Chilcot, the Permanent Under-Secretary at the NIO, came to dinner in the Secretariat last night.

The following is a summary note on points of immediate interest which arose during a lengthy and wide-ranging discussion. A further report follows.

Handling of the decommissioning debate

- Chilcot indicated that the Secretary of State is likely to propose to our Ministers today that an effort be made, in agreement with the Chairmen, to move discussion of the decommissioning paper out of Plenary as quickly as possible.

- What they envisage is that, after each participant has had an opportunity to offer general comments, and introductory remarks are made by the two Governments, there would be an agreement either to go into a round of bilaterals or to go into some (undefined) committee format.

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660/2

Their concern is to minimise the opportunities for McCartney, in particular, to subject the two Governments to cross-examination and to seek to undermine Trimble. The UUP leader, they believe, would be content with an arrangement to take the matter out of Plenary over the next few weeks.

We indicated broad sympathy with the objectives but queried the "committee" proposal, which in net terms would not be significantly different from the Plenary. Initially, Chilcot said that the British intention would be to have the Business Committee summoned for this purpose. We ruled this out on various grounds. He subsequently amended his proposal to a suggestion for a special committee of the Plenary.

As the discussion proceeded, however, he accepted that a round of bilaterals, with the British Government playing the lead role, might be the better route.

This and other aspects will obviously require discussion among Ministers today. Chilcot envisages that today's Plenary, allowing for an initial round of statements, might extend into tomorrow. The tactical question of whether the two Governments go first or seek to delay their statements until the end of the session will require attention.

If agreement is secured to go into bilaterals thereafter, the British see relatively little activity taking place in that format until after Drumcree and the Twelfth generally are out of the way. The intention would be to bring the matter back into Plenary for a vote before the end of the month.

We reiterated the importance of the two Governments standing shoulder to shoulder in this debate, on the terms agreed last week. Chilcot repeated the assurances given.

Drumcree

No decisions have yet been taken. Chilcot confirmed that some slight hopes are attached to bilateral contacts envisaged for today. He drew attention to the McCartney proposal ("pity about the source"), which was not far removed from the

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650/3

recent joint editorial, and hinted that this was the angle being pursued with the Orange Order. There are "a few gleams in the mud" and every effort will be made over the next day or so to probe these.

- If no accommodation can be reached, the Chief Constable (as Chilcot rather pointedly emphasised) will have to reach a decision - though this will be in conjunction with the Secretary of State. He would not speculate on what it might be. As to the timing of its announcement, the Secretary of State would like to go "earlier" while the Chief Constable would probably prefer to hold off for as long as possible.

- We made a very strong presentation to Chilcot on the need for the Irish Government to be briefed fully in advance of any announcement. A casual attitude to consultation with us on this crucial matter could imperil the prospect of Irish Government support for their decision, an asset of particular importance for them in present circumstances. The mistakes made by the previous Government must not be repeated.

- Chilcot assured us that the point was well understood on the British side. As regards last year, he claimed that it had not been possible to alert us to the Thursday decision (to force the parade down the Garvaghy Road) because "everything was happening in real time". He accepted, however, that the circumstances were quite different on this occasion and that "you need to know".

- He speculated that the decision would be signalled to our Ministers during Wednesday or Thursday. This would either happen at the level of Prime Minister to Taoiseach or Secretary of State to the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

- He indicated some concern that the decision should be taken, and conveyed to our Government, in advance of the meeting between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister scheduled for 3 pm on Thursday in Downing Street. He saw presentational difficulties if the timing of the announcement, which he believes must be made by Thursday at the latest, were to imply that the decision had emanated from that meeting.

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650/4

Contact with Sinn Féin

Chilcot indicated that Sinn Féin "have been ringing us constantly" since the Lurgan murders. The line being taken by the Prime Minister is one of openness to clarification of British Government intentions in a general sense. This would be done, Chilcot hinted, either in writing or through a third party. A further meeting at official level is not being ruled out but is not an option in the short term.

Yours sincerely

David Donoghue

David Donoghue
Joint Secretary

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