

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Secret

Mitchell Review: Meetings Week beginning 20 September 1999

1. Senator Mitchell moved the Review into a more intensive phase this week. Having focussed in the first two weeks on separate (effectively introductory) meetings with each party, he held a round of substantive meetings this week with groups of parties (schedule attached). Particularly key in this regard was a session he had on Wednesday with the UUP and Sinn Féin.

Mitchell's Approach

2. In briefings with Dermot Gallagher and Bill Jeffrey on Monday, Mitchell set out his thinking on the approach he proposed to take. He felt that he did not need more than three to four weeks to draw the Review to a conclusion one way or the other. He saw between now and the re-opening of the British Parliament (Monday 18 October) as his rough time-frame and, therefore, had in mind Friday, 15 October, as the end-date he was working towards.

3. Mitchell said that he intended to be in Belfast from 11-15 October. At that stage, he would decide whether to put forward proposals of his own or suggest a soft landing, which would allow the reins to be picked up again at the right time. He asked Gallagher and Jeffrey to let him have some draft proposals by Thursday of next week. He stressed that these ideas were for his consideration only; he, and he alone, would decide and judge whether to amend them and

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whether to pursue them with the parties. [Note: Gallagher and Jeffrey emphasised that they would have to clear any draft ideas at political level.]

4. One complication on the horizon in terms of party management is the fact that the UUP Annual Conference is on 9 October. Mitchell intends to talk privately to Trimble about this and ask him whether the latter would prefer any initiative, if there is to be one, to be before or after the Conference. Mitchell will make clear that if Trimble opts to postpone the crunch until after the Conference, he should ensure that his hands are not tied by any party motions or directives.

UUP/Sinn Féin Meeting

5. This was the first occasion on which the Sinn Féin and UUP leaderships had met at delegation level since July (although, of course, Adams and Trimble had met secretly on Tuesday of last week, and there had been a series of lower level meetings over the Summer). Sinn Féin was represented by Adams and McGuinness, while Trimble was accompanied by Reg Empey, Michael McGimpsey and Danny Kennedy.

6. De-briefing afterwards, Mitchell told Gallagher and Jeffrey (who were accompanied by Jonathan Stephens from the NIO and the undersigned) that it was a very difficult, emotional meeting, with much mutual recrimination and much expression of scepticism on both sides about the good faith and capacity to deliver of the other. Mitchell, while understanding that what was involved was partly a letting off of steam after the difficult events of the Summer, was surprised by the ferocity of the exchanges. To that extent, he was discouraged by what he saw and heard. On a more positive note, he was encouraged (a) by the earnestness with which both sides emphasised their desire and determination to work through the difficulties and (b) that both readily agreed

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to his proposal that they meet with him again next week, this time with a focus not on the past, but rather on how an accommodation could be forged.

7. On the basis that it was a first exchange, Mitchell did not seek to direct proceedings, but rather let each side "at it". The following was a flavour of the exchanges, as conveyed to us by Mitchell:

- In the trading of mutual recriminations, there was much use of phrases such as "that is simply not true and you know it!", "that is an evasion!", with "body language" to match.

- One source of recrimination was the publicly hard line taken by each side on the way in to the meeting - with both claiming that they had only said what they said in response to the comments of the other!

- Adams asked Trimble "what do you want?". Trimble replied "I want a complete and unequivocal ceasefire, I want total disarmament and I want it started now".

- Empey said that they needed a statement that the "war is over" and they wanted decommissioning pursuant to the De Chastelain formula. Adams said that decommissioning should be left to De Chastelain to get on with, to which Empey replied "but there is nothing for him to do".

- In a difficult exchange, Kennedy said "we need product, we need product!", to which Adams responded to the effect that insisting on product in advance was a "sure means of bringing this whole thing down". If he were able to, he would bring in a bunch of rifles now; this

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would make his life much easier. But it was simply not reality.

- McGuinness accused the UUP of letting the No side run the agenda, arguing that the field had been left exclusively to Paisley and Donaldson and that nobody had made the positive case for the Agreement. Trimble reacted angrily ("he turned deep red", according to Mitchell), gave a long and "vigorous" account of what he had been doing in this regard, and defended the strategy of bringing Donaldson on board.

- Speaking directly to Trimble, Adams said "you are the best bet we have. We want to work with you. We should go out and tell the press jointly that we are in this together and that we simply have to work out our differences." Trimble said "certain things" would have to be done before he could agree to such a step.

- There were, however, a number of lighter moments (speaking very much in relative terms). At one point, in response to persistent gesticulation by Trimble, Adams said "Stop pointing your finger at me", to which Trimble responded "OK, I will copy Tony Blair and use my thumb!" Moreover, Trimble sought to close the proceedings with a long quotation from Oliver Cromwell, to which McGuinness responded that "Cromwell is not the man to be quoting at us!". Trimble apparently argued that Cromwell had fought a "fair, clean war" - with, presumably, an implication about the IRA campaign - and the meeting ended with some dark humour on the relative merits of that thesis.

8. Mitchell told us that as they broke up, he warned both sides in very serious terms that if the Agreement were to fail, "events will develop in a manner not

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predictable or controllable by any of us". He cautioned strongly against any notion that there was a "cosy Plan B" which could be slotted into the place of the Agreement and which could be managed easily by one side or the other. He said that McGuinness told him that he had received precisely the same message from Rolf Meyer (a former key aide to de Klerk and a major figure in the South African negotiations) in Pretoria at the weekend. Mitchell also asked both sides to exercise restraint in what they said in the media.

9. Overall, and on further reflection overnight, Mitchell is "marginally encouraged" by how matters went. He is pleased, for instance, that his exhortation for more restraint in the media appears to have been heeded by both sides. While stressing to us that it was "impossible to have listened to what I heard and be optimistic", he is prepared to give considerable discount to the context of the meeting. The gap between the two sides continues to be enormous (Adams and McGuinness told him privately after the meeting that they still believe that Trimble could not do it), but Mitchell believes that the ball remains in play and that both sides are serious about giving it one more real go. He hopes to bring them together next week for an extended session - he has in mind a half day - and this will help to tease out more comprehensively and in a more focussed way the issues involved. Mitchell believes that he should have a better sense after that as to how realistic the chances are of constructing a breakthrough.

Meetings involving SDLP and Other Parties

10. The attached schedule sets out the other meetings that Mitchell had. He felt that the SDLP/SF meeting had been constructive, with the former taking a useful approach. They basically argued to Sinn Féin that whether we all liked it or not, the UUP difficulty was a reality and had to be faced up to. No particular

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progress was made, but Mitchell felt that the line the SDLP was taking was helpful. He said that Mallon was particularly scathing of the failsafe legislation.

11. Mitchell said that today's meeting between the UUP and the SDLP had gone well, and he had particular praise for the contribution of Mallon.

Next Steps

12. Tomorrow's meetings between Mitchell and the Minister of State and the Secretary of State, and separately, between the two Ministers will provide a useful opportunity to take stock after what has been the most substantive week of the Review to date. Mitchell leaves for Paris on Thursday (on private business) and will be in Helsinki (for an award ceremony) on Monday and Tuesday of next week, arriving in Belfast on Tuesday night. Trimble will be away at the Labour Party Conference in Bournemouth on Wednesday, so the next session between the UUP and Sinn Féin is likely to be on Thursday.

T O'Connor

22 September 1999

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Schedule 20-23 September 1999

Monday 20 September

16.30 Bill Jeffrey & Dermot Gallagher

17.15 NIWC/PUP/UDP/Alliance

Tuesday 21 September

16.45 Sinn Fein/UUP

18.30 SDLP/SF

Wednesday 22 September

10.30 SDLP/UUP

12.30 UUP/PUP

13.15 Sinn Féin

15.45 SDLP/Alliance/NIWC

17.00 UUP/UDP

18.00 UUP/NIWC

18.45 UUP/Alliance

Thursday 23 September

09.30 British & Irish Governments

11.00- UUP (Trimble and Empey) at Hilton
11.45

13.30- DUP
14.30

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