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Review: Meetings Involving Minister of State, Belfast, 23 September 1999

1. Minister of State O'Donnell and the Secretary of State, accompanied by officials, jointly met Senator Mitchell to review the progress to date of the Review. They also met General de Chastelain and his colleagues on the Independent Commission.

Senator Mitchell

2. Senator Mitchell gave an account of the week's meetings in broadly familiar terms (see earlier reports). He said that the SF/UUP meeting had been "necessary therapy" for both parties, but that one positive element had been the willingness of both to meet again. This was likely to happen next Friday, 1 October (there are scheduling difficulties arising out of the British Labour Party conference which prevent an earlier meeting).

3. He confirmed that the SDLP/UUP meeting had gone well. Mallon had set a good and generous tone, while Trimble had afterwards congratulated himself on his self-restraint in not responding to various SDLP provocations (for instance, a critical article by Eddie McGrady in the *Belfast Telegraph*).

4. Looking further ahead, he expected that Trimble would be unwilling to take any bold steps until after his party conference, on Saturday 9 October (subsequently, following a meeting with Trimble and Empey, he confirmed this to officials, and added that in consequence he has pushed his working target date for the completion of the review back a week, to Friday 22 October). At the next meeting, he intends to begin to press the UUP and Sinn Féin to indicate (a) what each requires from each other and (b) what each can give the

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other. He has made clear that he wants no further recriminations or focus on the past.

5. Mitchell said he has decided that he will, at an appropriate time to be decided, table a proposal of his own. He has already conveyed this to Sinn Féin. He made clear that, while he has asked Bill Jeffrey and Dermot Gallagher for ideas, he will make his own changes and present the proposal as his own, while acknowledging Governmental input.

6. On the substantive issues involved, Mitchell has told both the UUP and Sinn Féin that there will not be an accommodation without movement from both sides. He noted that Trimble had emphasised the indication in his *Irish Times* article of an openness to proposals on sequencing, so long as he could be sure that the proposals would work, ie result in decommissioning. Trimble had also been struck by the fact that, for the first time, Fred Cobain, who has been relatively hard-line, had said something similar at a meeting. Broadly, Mitchell felt that the UUP accepted that "jumping together" meant a sequence in which they took the first step.

7. Reflecting all we have been hearing from a variety of sources, Mitchell said that the UUP is placing a particular stress on the need for certainty, and for any assurances offered by Sinn Féin to be public enough for Trimble to make use of them in persuading his party.

8. In general, Mitchell seemed to display a degree of understanding for Trimble in the political difficulties in which he finds himself, citing the attack on him by Michelle Williamson for meeting Sinn Féin the day after attending the launch of her legal challenge to the Secretary of State's determination on the ceasefire.

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While accepting that Trimble is to an extent the author of his own misfortunes (it was "dumb" to attend the court hearing), "the poor guy.....is riding a tiger and could fall off at any moment".

9. Asked by the Minister of State how the Governments could help at the moment, Mitchell said that many in the UUP (he cited Cobain) believed that Sinn Féin wanted the process to fail because they looked forward to a superior Plan B. Accepting that the Governments had a fine line to tread, Mitchell felt nonetheless that nothing we said should give currency to this. He also cautioned against dire warnings about what would happen if the Review failed (Dermot Gallagher had earlier made the same point to the Secretary of State, who seemed tempted to say something along these lines in her Conference speech).

10. At the end of the meeting, Mitchell said that, despite some encouraging signs, he was not optimistic that the Review would succeed: a wide gap remained.

Independent Commission

11. General de Chastelain and his colleagues (including Andy Sens, who has replaced Don Johnson as the US representative) had scheduled a call on to the Secretary of State, who invited the Minister of State to attend.

12. The Commission is resuming its round of meetings with parties, following a lull since July. Martin McGuinness has said he will meet the Commission within the next fortnight.

13. The Commission had met officials from the Department of Justice the previous day in Dublin, and is planning a technical training exercise, with the assistance

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of the Defence Forces, in the Glen of Imaal in November.

14. De Chastelain continues to be of the view, as he said in July, that enough time remains to complete decommissioning by May 2000, if a start is made soon.

Rory Montgomery

24 September 1999

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