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NOTE FOR INFORMATION

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cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) -B
PS/Minister of State (B&L) - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Mr Fell - B
Mr Pilling - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Alston - B
Mr D J R Hill - B
Mr McNeill - O/R
Mr Dodds - B

a/s
a Mr McNeill
9/11

THE POLITICAL PROCESS - SOME REFLECTIVE VIEWS FROM THE BACKROOM

1. On Tuesday of this week, as part of a prearranged schedule accompanying an FCO official around the political parties, I had the opportunity to gain some reflective views on the political process brought to an end the previous week. During the morning I spoke to David Ford, Alliance Party General Secretary, Patsy McGlone, SDLP General Secretary, Nigel Dodds, Lord Mayor of Belfast and DUP "Chief Whip" and Jeffrey Donaldson, Honorary Secretary of the UUP. All but one of these officials (McGlone) was closely involved in the talks process as either a member of his party's delegation or its backroom staff. Many of their perceptions could have been predicted, however it should be borne in mind that whilst these are the views of well placed individuals, others within their parties might present a different analysis.

2. David Ford, for Alliance, registered the following points:

- (a) the party itself had come through the process unscathed and had remained intact. There were others who were clearly in disarray but they had never been a cohesive unit in the first place. Electoral credibility and support may have increased and there appeared to be some hard evidence to support this. Whether the party could capitalise on this in an actual test was a different matter.

- (b) much of the blame for the early slow pace and eventual inconclusiveness rested with the Unionist Parties. There was much filed away in Alliance minds which would re-emerge to haunt "soft" Unionists in any General Election campaign - but Alliance would keep this powder dry if renewed attempts were made to restart the process in advance of an election.
- (c) the leadership of the party had slightly divergent views on the likelihood and merit of starting again soon. The leader viewed a second process under whatever format as being indeterminate in length and therefore likely to impinge on activity in the run up to the next election. He was therefore a little pessimistic. His deputy seemed keen to move forward quickly after the IGC next week and build on the useful exchanges in the "common themes and realities" sessions.
- (d) the political process itself had been successful to a degree but more should have been made of the opportunity. In particular HMG's mistakes in dealing with the Unionists, giving them the PR coup of the No 10 meeting and letting them off the hook with the "Carrington" episode would surely now be regarded by the Government Team as tactical blunders.
- (e) better relationships have been forged with the SDLP and a greater understanding of their position obtained. The seriousness and genuineness of their participation was recognised. Unionists were held in less esteem, particularly as a result of the performance of the UUP. One example had been the apparent helpfulness and flexibility of Seamus Mallon - an unexpected source of both yet Ken Maginnis had provided little evidence of either.

3.. Patsy McGlone offered the following analysis

- (a) the SDLP believed themselves to be whiter than white following the conclusion of the talks. The absence of the party for a period during the process had been fully supported at grass roots level, no ill effects were likely. Unity and cohesiveness had been maintained.
- (b) Unionists had made a complete botch up. Molyneaux was only there to "endure" the process. Paisley had simply been Paisley. Unionists (particularly the UUP) had proved themselves to be inept negotiators and had fundamentally blundered in relieving the pressure on Sinn Fein. But speeches on the 12 July undoubtedly would be the first step in some form of regrouping exercise for the benefit of their grass roots.
- (c) Unionists still appeared to have enormous difficulty facing present realities. Their platform of seeking compromise from others when the leadership themselves appear to offer little in terms of accepting fundamental issues provided confirmation of this.
- (d) the prospect of discussions with the other parties outside a formal process and without the involvement of sovereign governments was viewed as being impractical but they hoped informal contacts could continue.
- (e) whilst the party was willing and ready to participate in a second process in reality this seemed to be only possible in the medium to long term. The general election and preparations for it were unlikely to lead to a political climate capable of supporting compromise and progress.

4. Nigel Dodds produced the following summary.

- (a) the Secretary of State had announced a gap for political development. The gap ended on 16 July and by definition the

process had to end before then - therefore what was all the "fuss" about. The 16 July date and the DUP view of it had been signposted early on in the process giving others ample opportunity to do something about it.

- (b) having said that they (the DUP) would have been prepared to agree to an extension of the gap by a few weeks to conclude Strand I and leave a sustainable amount of distance between 12 July and the first Strand II meeting.
- (c) some flexibility by the Irish Government towards 16 July should have been given to promote (b) above.
- (d) a second process could not be bound by the backcloth of the Anglo Irish Agreement if it was to achieve success. But the framework of the three strands of relationships was well recognised and likely to accrue continued support.
- (e) the DUP might suffer some reduction in electoral support but this was likely to be more from individuals opting out of the voting process across the political spectrum as opposed to a transfer of allegiance.
- (f) the exchanges in the latter half of the process supported the view that devolution in NI remained the key objective. Anything else was of secondary importance.
- (g) a new process would not be a viable proposition until after the next election - there were, in effect, only nine months left for the present Government.
- (h) the Government team itself needed to scrutinise their actions particularly with regard to early "tests of faith" and allowing procedural points to dominate the more serious business on the agenda.

5. Jeffrey Donaldson produced the most frank analysis.

- (a) There could be no disputing the fact that Unionists had been largely to blame for ineffective negotiating and causing blockages during the process - although HMG was not faultless either. Recent press comments had been painful (perhaps as a result of their accuracy) so unionists had to regroup and move forward from this position.
- (b) the DUP and Paisley in particular had lost heart by the middle of the process. Signals were being received within the party and beyond in the rural community that the DUP could not move into Strand II with widespread support.
- (c) there was a lack of cohesiveness within the UUP and there was, within some ranks, a recognition that the leader needed to be exposed to the "real" realities of the situation. This didn't mean however that the leader was unlikely to be leader when the next initiative came round. It was Donaldson's view that a similar change of emphasis had to take place in the DUP. This process had a long way to go and had to get moving soon otherwise there was little point in entering any new "initiative".
- (d) the public image presented by (c) affected the views of others with regard to the genuineness of the unionist position. But there were some within the party who still believed that these attitudes would change by simply reiterating that position. Others believed that a greater recognition of realities at the senior levels of the Party might do more to reduce these barriers.
- (e) it was to be expected that Paisley would continue to issue strongly worded statements on the political development scene both past and present to increase the perception that he was not weakening in his personal resolve to keep Dublin

at arms length; this would have the double effect for the grass roots of shifting the blame away from unionism generally. The UUP were unlikely to mirror this approach beyond the 12 July but instead commence a detailed and reflective assessment of how the party might seek to improve their profile in preparing for the next process.

- (f) it was important to ensure that the mechanics of any new process were capable of encompassing as many members of each party delegation as possible all of the time. The lack of this in the early days of the bilaterals had not helped cohesiveness and the confidence of some members to seek to influence others.

[Signed TW]

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