

FROM: PS/Secretary of State
9 July 1991

cc PS/SofS (B&L) - B
PS/MofS (B&L) - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Mr Felly - B
Mr Pilling - B
Mr Alston - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr McNeill - B
Mr Cooke - B
Mr Pope - B

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Mr D J R Hill - B

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SECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETING WITH NI PARTY LEADERS: 2 JULY 1991

1. The Secretary of State met the four Party leaders in his room in Parliament Buildings just after 6.30 pm on Tuesday 2 July 1991. Dr Mawhinney, PUS and I were also present.

2. The Secretary of State said that he had discussed the current impasse with all the leaders. Although potentially there was one week remaining, there was a difficulty for the SDLP in making substantive proposals because only part of the process could be addressed and there was no guarantee that subsequent parts would take place: nothing could be said about the future because the Unionist position was that the current process would end by 16 July. There was therefore little point in continuing to meet. To do so would serve only to irritate all concerned. The previous week had seen a genuine intent to grapple with some of the issues involved. If this were to be continued at some time in the future, an orderly conclusion to the current talks, without significant recrimination, was necessary. He would therefore make a statement to the House the following day indicating that the process based on the 26 March statement had ended, that there had been value in the discussions, and that he personally hoped it would be possible to take matters forward in the future, although this would also be a matter for the others concerned. If asked about further talks, he

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would propose to say that several procedural lessons had been learnt. If others in the House could broadly endorse his statement, this would help to avoid recrimination.

3. In response to a question from Dr Paisley, the Secretary of State said that a very short press statement would be issued that evening, followed by a final plenary meeting the next day, a further press statement and then, in the afternoon, his statement to the House.

4. Dr Alderdice said he had already been rung up by the Press. It would be unfortunate if the plans for an orderly conclusion were frustrated by delaying the concluding meeting until the following day. He therefore favoured a final meeting and announcing the end of the talks that evening. Dr Paisley said it was better to deal properly with the conclusion. It would therefore be preferable to say as little as possible that evening and get the Press statement right the following day. The Secretary of State added that another advantage of concluding the following morning was that it minimised the time between the press being told and his statement to the House. Dr Paisley and Mr Molyneaux then handed over the points which they wished to see included in the Secretary of State's statement. Mr Hume said he had no points to make. Dr Alderdice asked for the statement to be as brief as possible and to stick to the facts. As he did not feel he had discharged his duty to the people of Northern Ireland, the least said the better. He doubted whether the conclusion of the talks could be kept from the media. Dr Paisley emphasised that the fact that they were meeting the following day would dampen speculation.

5. Dr Alderdice said presentation of the end of the talks would not be easy. The loyalist paramilitaries would end their ceasefire. Others would say that they had said beforehand that the talks would not work. It was unrealistic to think that none of the participants would comment. Dr Paisley said that no doubt the Northern Ireland people would "cuss the lot of us". The loyalist paramilitary "ceasefire" was an astute political move, encouraged by some clergymen, and not a genuine ceasefire. What concerned him was

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the absence of a political forum in Northern Ireland for politicians from Northern Ireland to influence matters in their own country. Dr Alderdice shared this concern.

6. Mr Molyneaux said it was a sad day for everyone. The process had lasted for four years for some participants. It was important to end on good terms, and to set the right tone in plenary the following day and in the House. If people "indulged in antics" it would make it "more difficult to put the train back, maybe on a different track".

7. The Secretary of State said that in regard to the possibility of having fresh talks, these would have to be carried forward ab initio subsequent to 16 July when it was judged sensible to do so, if at all, in the light of public reaction. The prospects for carrying matters forward would be very substantially enhanced if the parties remained on reasonable terms with one another. Mr Molyneaux commented that it would be unthinkable in Great Britain for all the main party leaders to get round the table as they had done.

8. Dr Paisley said that what had happened was a tragedy. It was a pity that the two Governments had not "caught the difficulty by the throat". He and Mr Molyneaux had started the process. It had been a long, hard road. It had not been easy. He could not control everything that was said on the streets. It was difficult to focus on the principles and not personalities. The Ulster people were sore. There had been much recrimination after the Atkins Conference. Nor would he wish the Northern Ireland people to think that the paramilitaries could turn on the violence. The Secretary of State said that the effect of the IRA's actions during the talks had been to make people more resolute and to increase the commitment to the principle of the talks.

9. Dr Alderdice commented that the Atkins Conference was followed by a "black decade", with hunger strikes and no political future for the Province. He hoped the gap would not be so long again. Dr Paisley said that was a matter for the two Governments.

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The Secretary of State said it was also a matter for the others concerned. He respected the Unionist position in both logic and principle. If he were to come back at some stage in the future, he would expect Dr Paisley's response to be judged in the interests of his party, and his concern about the absence of a democratic forum. Dr Paisley replied that any proposition would be considered in the interests of his country, not his party. If the Governments were to come back, all the things that might happen would have to be looked at. The Secretary of State observed that if every conceivable contingency had been considered, the talks would never have started. Dr Paisley referred to his suggestion to utilise the Anglo-Irish Council. All involved could learn from what had happened. Parts of the debates, particularly those of the previous week, were helpful. Dr Alderdice said that he was sure that all those involved had ideas for improvement. Mr Hume, on being pressed, said he had no doubt that the SDLP would have something to say.

10. Concluding the discussion, the Secretary of State said they would meet in plenary session at 10.00 am the following day. In his remarks he would repeat the analysis of the current situation, the way ahead as agreed, and seek agreement to the final press statement.

11. The meeting, in which Mr Hume was largely silent throughout, ended just after 7.00 pm.

(signed)

A J D PAWSON
Private Secretary