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18 OCT 1991
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68-10
17 OCT 1991

FROM: PS/SECRETARY OF STATE
16 OCTOBER 1991

cc: PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - B
PS/Paymaster General (L&B) - B
PS/Minister of State (L&B) - B
PS/PUS (L&B) - B
PS/Mr Fell - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr A P Wilson - B
Mr Alston - B
Mr Wood - B
Mr McNeill - B
Mr Cooke - B
Mr Dodds - B
Mr Leach - B
Mr Archer, RID, FCO - B
HMA Dublin - B

Mr D J R Hill - B

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SECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETING WITH SDLP: 14 OCTOBER 1991

The Secretary of State met an SDLP delegation of Dr Joe Hendron, Mr Denis Haughey, Ms Brid Rodgers, Mr Sean Farren and led by Mr Seamus Mallon, at just after 5.30 pm in the Press Conference Room at Stormont Castle on Monday 14 October 1991.

2. The Secretary of State explained that he had seen Mr Hume on 16 September and earlier in the month in Derry. He had also seen Dr Alderdice and had met with the Unionist leaders on 20 September. This was the day after the murder of Mr Haldane, which had affected the climate of the meeting and restricted the time available for political discussion. The Unionists had suggested that the SDLP and themselves should meet in the House, drawing on the Harland & Wolff analogy when a joint Unionist and SDLP approach to the Prime Minister had been developed. He himself did not regard the Harland & Wolff situation as being a precise analogy. Significantly, the Unionists had not in any way attempted to cite the security situation or the potential proximity of a general

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election as possible reasons for not entering into political talks. This was encouraging. The Unionists had raised some points of a procedural nature in respect of the previous talks, but had not made any reference to the Independent Chairman for Strand 2. Their principal pre-occupation was that enough time should be allowed for the talks, and that some form of extension or "injury time" should be possible if substantive discussions were underway. Finally, the Unionist leaders had indicated their preference for exploratory talks about the way ahead to take place at Westminster. In view of this, Mr Hume and he had agreed that it would be sensible to have a considered exchange of views in his absence.

3. Mr Mallon asked why the Unionists could not simply attend reconvened talks. The Secretary of State responded that the Unionists had indicated that there were features of the earlier talks that needed to be looked at again in order to avoid the problems experienced previously. Their key concern appeared to centre on the time available. The Unionists would not wish to find themselves in a position similar to that of the SDLP towards the end of the previous talks, when to show their hand would have risked their cards remaining face up on the table when the talks ended. There was also another issue concerning the size of the delegations for the next series of talks. This was not exclusively a Unionist concern. Essentially, their proposal was that they would wish to have the opportunity of exploring the possibilities for further talks in the Westminster context and at Parliamentary level.

4. Mr Mallon pointed out that the proposal would mean the elimination of one political party from the talks. The Secretary of State said that he did not envisage prolonged discussions. Nor did he envisage them involving substantive matters concerning detailed constitutional arrangements. Previously, the Unionists had not been prepared to have discussions prior to the gap in the Anglo-Irish conferences for theological reasons, in particular

Article 4 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Thus it was possible that the current proposal could represent a change in climate which, with the Unionists talking direct to the SDLP, would enable things to move forward faster.

5. Mr Mallon asked what features the Unionists were looking for. The Secretary of State replied that he was unsure. However, they were probably looking for a substantial extension, agreed in advance, to the gap between Conferences or for flexibility with respect to the gap. He was unaware of any particular formula that the Unionists were seeking. As Dr Paisley had taken the line that the first set of talks had ended as a result of the IGC on 16 July, any new set of talks had to be seen as fresh. There was also unhappiness amongst Unionist supporters about the holding of Strand 2 of the talks at Stormont. Thus initial talks at Westminster in advance would provide some cover for the Unionist leadership.

6. Mr Mallon deduced that there were four features under review: the gap, the venue for Strand 2, the numbers at the conference table, and the venue for discussions about new talks. Dr Mawhinney said that in his view the "gap" was the only serious one. Mr Mallon said that it was difficult to discuss a gap in the abstract. If substantial progress was being made, then sufficient time would be made for the talks. Dr Mawhinney interpreted this as proceeding similarly to the previous talks, with there being an end IGC, but with more time being made available if substantial progress was being made. Mr Mallon went on to say that there was no point in holding talks if the Unionists did not have the political will to make progress. The Unionist agenda was clear, and the two governments should therefore consider taking matters forward. Mr Haughey added that the SDLP could not agree to talks which involved effective suspension of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Mr Mallon stressed that there should not be difficulties about the length of gap proving sufficient if the commitment was there to make progress. One problem that would have to be

avoided would be the amount of time that members of delegations had spent "twiddling thumbs" during the previous talks. The Secretary of State observed that Mr Collins had been very concerned about a definite end to the gap. HMG had remained firm on the 16 July IGC. If the Irish Government maintained an identical position, then there would be problems. Mr Mallon re-iterated his view that it was difficult to settle the question of a gap in the abstract. It would be preferable to see where matters had reached in actual discussions. The SDLP were willing to talk to the Unionists at Westminster at any time about anything. That said, the SDLP would be very unhappy with the Alliance Party being sidelined. But if the will and the commitment were there, the SDLP would be willing to see what developed. The SDLP would, however, be very wary about another set of talks conditions. The Secretary of State observed that much time had been spent previously to meet the pre-conditions on the Unionist side, and there would be insufficient time before the General Election if there were a similar engagement with pre-talks this time. The problem with a general election was the one which the SDLP had had the previous July, in that one party could be left with their cards face up on the table. In those circumstances it was not realistic to expect hands to be revealed.

7. Continuing, the Secretary of State said that he had met Mr Collins on 15 September and 1 October. The two governments had had the opportunity of discussing possible changes that could be made to the talks arrangements in order to accommodate the parties. He would be speaking to Mr Molyneaux and Dr Paisley to ask them to spell out more clearly what they envisaged. In view of their previous reluctance to have discussions outside of a gap, because they might be perceived as taking place under the Anglo-Irish Agreement, their proposal could be a positive, pragmatic step forward. Mr Mallon responded that the SDLP would like the talks to re-commence. No-one was obtaining any advantage from the absence of movement on the political front. The SDLP would welcome

knowing more precisely what the Unionist leaders had in mind. While talking to the SDLP in Westminster seemed a strange way of conducting business, it would be acceptable. Mr Farren was concerned that the discussions in that forum should not move on to substantive business.

8. Mr Mallon raised the speech by Mr Hurd at the Conservative Party Conference. He was concerned about the references to the debate no longer being about the Border and partition. The implications of this could affect the terms of reference of the political talks. The concentration on how Northern Ireland affairs should be run within the UK was at variance with the equal weighting given to the Strands in the talks process. Remarks such as those by Mr Hurd were unsettling, and also ran counter to the impression that there would be all to play for in a situation of non-violence. The Secretary of State responded that Mr Hurd had spelt out in his speech the fact that there was an Irish dimension. In his own speech, he had re-affirmed the three stranded approach. Mr Mallon emphasized the importance of keeping matters fluid and not appearing to close down options.

9. Turning to the security situation, Mr Mallon said that he had heard the statements from Cardinal Daly and the Chief Constable. He was worried about the message from the Cardinal in the sense that now was a time for re-assurance rather than warnings that the Province might be on the brink of an abyss. That said, the situation was extremely worrying, and it was clear that PIRA were prepared to use any conceivable tactic. The Secretary of State agreed that the violence was horrific. Dr Hendron said that fear was stalking everybody in the Lower Falls area. The drugs situation was reaching epidemic proportions in West Belfast. The pushers could have been taken out by the RUC: the ridiculous statement from the IRA gave them credibility with the population when nothing else was being done. The Secretary of State said he realised that the prospect of a general election tended to distort behaviours, but he hoped that the violence would not take politicians from the table, but rather bring them back. Mr Haughey said that the actions of the security forces could create a climate of aggression with the public.

10. The Secretary of State asked whether there had been any pattern in bringing to an end the previous outbreaks of "tit for tat" killings. Mr Mallon commented that cynics would say that when there had been sufficient killing, the perpetrators would be frightened off, but whether that was the case was debatable. In the past, he recalled that the police had got on top of the gangs and this had helped to stop it. That might not be so easy this time, and the Chief Constable was right to say that it was impossible to protect everybody against the freelance or "wild card" element among the paramilitaries. Until a settlement was reached there was a real risk of bigotry and sectarianism creeping increasingly into situations and attitudes. One example of this concerned a local priest the previous week who had rung the police about an incident but to which there had been no response.



11. The Secretary of State thanked the SDLP delegation for coming and expressing their views so clearly.

12. The meeting ended at 6.45 pm.

Signed

A J D PAWSON
PS/Secretary of State
OAB Extn 6462
16 October 1991

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