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a m stanton

From: PS/Secretary of State
9 May 1991

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

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Mr D J R Hill (B&L) - B

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BILATERAL MEETINGS WITH PARTY LEADERS: 7 MAY 1991

The Secretary of State held a series of meetings with NI party leaders on the afternoon of 7 May. These are set out below. Dr Mawhinney and I were also present.

Dr Alderdice

2. The Secretary of State saw Dr Alderdice at 1355 hrs. First, he confirmed that Dr Alderdice would be content for talks not to take place on 1 July, but that they should take place during the Parliamentary Recess at the end of May, apart from the Bank Holiday Monday.

3. The Secretary of State then explained that the Unionist position remained essentially unchanged. Their view was that the second strand of talks should take place in London. The Unionist leaders appeared to be on something of a limb, and while they had climbed off such positions in the past, this had been after a significant period of time had elapsed. They also appeared genuinely to have an erroneous idea of the Irish Government's flexibility. They seemed to think that if they stood firm, the other parties would come into line with them. In the Secretary of State's view, neither the British Government nor the SDLP would tolerate a situation in which no part of Strand 2 took place on the island of Ireland.

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4. Dr Alderdice said he was puzzled about the Unionist position. Their concern about Articles 2 and 3 seemed insufficient reason for their position. He assumed they must be concerned about public perceptions. The Secretary of State replied that he thought the Unionist leaders were concerned about being undermined from their own side. They also wished to establish as favourable circumstance as possible in order to sell any deal that emerged from the talks.

5. Asked for his suggestions, Dr Alderdice said one option, albeit marginal, might be to continue on the basis that the Unionists would be part of the UK team, and that if the UK team decided to meet in a place which did not suit the Unionists, they could decide to opt out at that time. The Secretary of State commented that such an approach would not increase the likelihood of a successful conclusion to the talks. Dr Mawhinney added that it would also be more difficult to get other parties to negotiate substantively. Dr Alderdice accepted these views.

Mr Hume

6. The Secretary of State saw Mr Hume at 1415 hrs, just after Dr Alderdice had left. He explained the impasse that had been reached regarding the venue for the second Strand, and commented that the statements by Mr Collins and the Taoiseach indicating flexibility in their position appeared to have been misread by the Unionists as the Irish Government being unwilling to see the talks break down on this issue. His own understanding was that the Irish Government were willing to be flexible within reason, but that it would be necessary for everyone concerned to show a sense of accommodation. A reasoned outcome was important. Mr Hume commented that to meet in Europe would be to expose the process to ridicule. The Secretary of State agreed that this would not be a sensible option.

7. Mr Hume said that the SDLP had already made a concession by agreeing to hold the first Strand at Parliament Buildings. It was very reasonable to split the second Strand between London and Dublin. If it was symbolism that concerned the Unionists, the

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Throne Room in Dublin Castle should satisfy this requirement. He would be prepared for a symbolic meeting of Strand 2 to take place in Northern Ireland if this would help. Armagh was a possibility. The Unionists were frightened of the "boys with placards". It was inconsistent to oppose meeting in the South when Mr Maginnis had met the Opposition in the Dail.

8. Dr Mawhinney asked whether there was any flexibility over the split of time between London and Dublin. Mr Hume responded that 50/50 was reasonable. Pressed further by Dr Mawhinney, he went on to say that sufficient time would need to be spent in Dublin to show that it was not simply a symbolic gesture: 95%/5% in London/Dublin would not do. The issue was becoming more difficult. There was a tough editorial in the Irish Independent - a Fine Gael paper. If the Republic was being asked to agree to a new form of the Agreement and also to propose constitutional changes, it was entirely reasonable for some of the meetings to take place in the South. Why did the Unionists find this so difficult?

9. The Secretary of State explained that because of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution, they were under pressure from their own supporters. They were, he thought, concerned about being undermined (the "Governor Lundy syndrome"), and also that the chances of selling a deal would be better if it were done in London rather than elsewhere. Mr Hume said he would have no objection to the talks ending up in London.

10. The Secretary of State asked Mr Hume whether he was content to accede to the Unionists' desire for there not to be any publicity for either the first round of plenaries or for Strand 2. Mr Hume said that he was. Finally, the Secretary of State said that he did not plan to hold talks on 1 July, the 75th Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, but he did see them continuing through the May Parliamentary Recess, apart from the Bank Holiday Monday. Mr Hume indicated his assent to these proposals.

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Mr Molyneaux and Dr Paisley

11. The Secretary of State saw Mr Molyneaux and Dr Paisley in his room at 1435 hrs, just after Mr Hume had left. He said he understood the Unionist position, but thought that the Unionist leaders had slightly misread the position of the Dublin Government. The latter were relatively but not absolutely flexible. Their position was that as Strand 2 concerned relationships between the peoples of Ireland, the talks should take place on the island of Ireland. He doubted whether the Unionist position that Strand 2 should take place in London would be agreed by the others concerned. Mr Molyneaux asked whether the positions of the Republic and the SDLP were synonymous in the end; the Taoiseach would surely have to support the SDLP in whatever position they adopted. The Secretary of State said that the Irish Government's position was to be flexible, provided Dublin was not wholly excluded from the discussions in Strand 2. The Republic fully recognised the Unionist concerns.

12. Dr Paisley commented that Strand 2 had yet to be reached. The Secretary of State replied that if the ground rules were not clear, there was a risk that the SDLP would not negotiate seriously. Dr Paisley agreed that the issue of the venue for Strand 2 had now to be faced. As any deal would have to be settled in Strand 3, would it help if the Unionists were prepared to go to Dublin for Strand 3? This could be possible as by then the Unionists would have seen the "colour of their money", and the difficulties over Articles 2 and 3 would be cleared away. The Secretary of State said that the position of the Government of the Republic had to be borne in mind. If the Taoiseach were to indicate his willingness to change Articles 2 and 3, it was inconceivable that he would do so outside the Republic, particularly in view of the political inclination of his Party. Moreover, any indication of a deal had to be given before the end of the process. Dr Paisley responded that he could see the Taoiseach making such a grand, statesman-like gesture in London. The Unionists would in any case be prepared to preserve confidentiality. The Secretary of State doubted whether this would be wholly possible over such a matter. If there were

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genuine alternation between London and Dublin (to where it would be possible to fly down from Belfast), the Unionist response to the movement on Articles 2 and 3 could come in London.

13. Continuing, the Secretary of State said he could imagine Strand 2 beginning with a session to discuss the nature of the relationship, in which the Unionists would make their views on Articles 2 and 3 very clear. All this could take a week. If then there were to be a meeting in Dublin, and if the Irish Government were so minded, they could indicate what their position on Articles 2 and 3 would be, together with their other proposals, then the Unionist response could be given in London the following week. While it was not possible to be certain about the precise sequence of events, any movement on Articles 2 and 3 had to be made early enough in the process for the remaining issues to be discussed. Mr Molyneaux commented that this proposal might be difficult. In his view, it was easier to go to Dublin later rather than earlier in Strand 2. The Secretary of State said that he needed to be clear that if talks were to be held in Dublin, what would be the easiest timing so far as the Unionists were concerned. In earlier conversations, to which no reference had been made during the bilaterals, the Unionist leaders had indicated their position on this. Dr Paisley referred, somewhat emotionally, to the constancy of his position and concluded by repeating that he was on the record as being willing to go and face up to Dublin. The problem was delivering any deal. The talks were a political conference, not a peace conference. It was impossible to know in advance what terrorist atrocities might occur. Mr Molyneaux commented that as much as the Unionists wanted to help, it was difficult to see how they could change their views on the venue for the second Strand.

14. Dr Paisley said that it was not essential that the talks took place in London, another part of the UK (sic, but presumably he meant GB) would be acceptable. The Secretary of State referred to the practical benefits of holding meetings in London. Mr Molyneaux commented that a venue "completely out of context" would be nonsensical. The Secretary of State agreed.

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15. Dr Mawhinney said that as there would be no "deal" until the end of the third Strand, there was no need to be concerned about meetings in the second Strand which took place in Dublin leading to a "Dublin deal" problem. Dr Paisley and Mr Molyneaux thought that the problem would remain. Dr Paisley said that the Taoiseach was likely to be subtle in his approach. He would look for concessions in respect of a "constitutionalised" Council of Ireland and replacement for the Anglo-Irish Agreement before considering changes to Articles 2 and 3. The Secretary of State said that it was important not to underestimate the difficulties the Taoiseach would be under in defending a major concession in respect of his own constitution, let alone if he were to make this concession abroad. Mr Molyneaux asked whether the Taoiseach could not simply make a statement in the Dail. Dr Mawhinney pointed out that the Unionists could chose to do a deal only if there had been a movement on Articles 2 and 3, in which case they would be seen to have addressed the fundamental issue. Mr Molyneaux stressed the importance of retaining the ability to deliver any deal. Dr Paisley added that to many Unionists the talks were simply a slippery slope. A deal was no good if it could not be delivered.

16. The Secretary of State said that people behaved in response to the way in which they were treated. They responded to being trusted. Even assuming the Unionist position on Strand 2 was agreed by others, the behaviour of those others involved in the talks would be affected accordingly: the Unionists' refusal to go to Dublin would send a signal which would cause others to negotiate accordingly. At present there was no basis for going forward, and the talks would have to be aborted because plenary sessions could not be started until the issue had been solved. There would, of course, also be a public relations problem if the talks were to break at this juncture. Dr Paisley responded that he was prepared to live with unpopularity. Mr Molyneaux agreed that a breakdown would have a negative effect, but there would be an even bigger negative effect if they "gave way".

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17. Dr Mawhinney said that movement by the Government of the Republic's on Articles 2 and 3 would create a situation in which the majority in Northern Ireland would be willing to pay a price.

Dr Paisley responded that in Northern Ireland, it was perceptions that counted, rather than facts. For Unionists, talking to Dublin was the equivalent of betrayal, despite the fact that no one had proposed any alternative to the talks. He would like to see the talks succeed, and therefore it might be better to take a little while to try to resolve the problem. Mr Molyneaux agreed, suggesting that the bilaterals continue in order to collect the views of delegations to see what common ground existed on other matters.

18. Dr Paisley said that one meeting on the island of Ireland, not the first, second or third, might be possible if the Taoiseach wanted to make a gesture. It would however have to be in the North, although he could not bring Mr Haughey to Ballymena! He went on to wonder about the effects of a general election. The Secretary of State commented that it could be a different Northern Ireland Secretary after an election. Dr Paisley said that that would be a tragedy.

19. Dr Mawhinney asked whether the Unionists would be prepared to stay on in Parliament Buildings for Strand 2 of the talks. Dr Paisley pointed to the difficulty of bringing people to Stormont who had a claim on the territory of Northern Ireland. The Secretary of State commented that the Irish Government would almost certainly not come.

20. The Secretary of State asked whether the Unionist leaders had any ideas for resolving the impasse. Mr Molyneaux responded that he could not see any way round the current road-block. Dr Paisley suggested that he and Mr Molyneaux went to talk to Mr Hume to ensure that he understood the Unionist point of view and to see whether any progress was possible. The Secretary of State agreed that this would be a good idea, but cautioned that while he would not be precipitate in calling an end to the talks, only a relatively short time could elapse before the talks would have to be brought to a close.

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21. The meeting ended at 1555 hrs, and resumed at 1620 hrs.
22. Mr Molyneaux said that they had had a civilised conversation with Mr Hume, who had gone to consult his colleagues. However, the gap had not been significantly narrowed. Dr Paisley said that Mr Hume had drawn attention to his objections to holding Strand 1 in Parliament Buildings, of which the Unionists were previously unaware. A possibility for a trade-off existed, as the Unionists were prepared to meet elsewhere in NI for Strand 1. Mr Hume had been told that the Unionists were unable to move on the issue of the venue for Strand 2. Mr Hume had responded to suggestions about the third Strand that its venue did not matter. He had also told the Unionists about his ideas on the agenda.
23. The Secretary of State sought, and obtained, Unionist agreement to the talks continuing during the May Recess, except for the Bank Holiday Monday. Finally, he told Mr Molyneaux and Dr Paisley that he would be in touch again by 1700 hrs.

Mr Hume

24. Mr Hume came to see the Secretary of State at 1625 hrs, just after the Unionist leaders had left. He said that the Unionist leaders had told him that they had never expected that the second Strand would take place in Dublin, and neither had they known about the difficulties caused for the SDLP through holding Strand 1 in Parliament Buildings. Since there were three Strands to the talks, for the second Strand to move between Belfast, London and Dublin seemed entirely reasonable. Since then, the SDLP had compromised and proposed a process of alternation between Dublin and London, with the Unionists having choice of order. If a Northern Ireland venue were necessary for symbolic reasons, he would be ready to agree to that as well. Armagh, being Dr Paisley's birth place, would seem suitable. His meeting with the Unionist leaders had been friendly. The issue of venue for the second Strand had been hyped-up by the media, and, in his view, also by some Unionists. The SDLP proposal was a reasonable compromise. Arrangements could be finalised in London not Dublin so as to avoid accusations of a

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"Dublin deal". It was unreasonable to expect a Government of any country to agree to a new international agreement and a new constitution without the courtesy of some of the meetings being held in their country. He had pointed out to the Unionists that they had cover through being part of the "UK team". To his surprise, they had responded that this had not been their suggestion!

25. The Secretary of State had said that the Unionist position remained the same as it had been earlier in the day. The issue was proving a tiresome and public difficulty. If it were possible to solve the issue, it would be more likely that the parties would get down to serious matters, where giving media briefings on complex issues would be less attractive. Mr Hume replied that the basic question was whether solutions were being sought or whether people were simply playing politics.

26. The meeting ended at 1635 hrs when Dr Paisley telephoned the Secretary of State to tell him that the Unionists would be happy to see Strand 1 of the talks moved to Stormont Castle, if this would help the SDLP. The meeting with Mr Hume was resumed at about 1640 hrs, just after the telephone call from Dr Paisley. The Secretary of State relayed the Unionists' proposal. Mr Hume responded that as the SDLP were already in Parliament Buildings, the damage had been done and the rubicon crossed. There was no point in changing now. Was the venue for the second Strand a real problem?

27. The Secretary of State said that Dr Paisley had pointed to the problem of perceptions. Dr Mawhinney added that the question of venue appeared to be a real problem for the Unionists. Mr Hume observed that he thought the Unionist leaders were very shaken when they came to see him. The issue of venue had been "hyped up" by themselves and the media. The Secretary of State said that if a way through the difficulty could not be found, then the talks would effectively break up before they had started. He had told Mr Collins on 26 April that the question of venue was a problem because of its symbolism and implications. He was more relaxed about the possibility of making progress in other areas.

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28. Mr Hume said that if the talks went ahead without a decision, they would certainly run into trouble. The Secretary of State agreed, and said that Dr Paisley also took the same line. Mr Hume asked about alternatives, but commented that a location in Europe would be very difficult. The Secretary of State agreed. A cosmetic solution was not the answer. Either a way through was found, or the talks had "run into the buffers". He did not propose to take any final decisions on that day, but there would be a problem if it could not be sorted out the following day.

29. Mr Hume said that it would be helpful to him to let it be known publicly that he had been prepared to compromise, but he thought that might not help to solve the problem. Dr Mawhinney confirmed that view, and it was agreed that the line with the media would simply be that a series of meetings had taken place all day, and they would continue tomorrow.

30. At this point, a message was received from Dr Alderdice saying he was strongly of the view that all the parties should stay in the building until the issue of the venue had been resolved. The Secretary of State and Mr Hume both thought it would be better to have a break and return to the issue the following day.

Mr Molyneaux and Dr Paisley

31. Mr Molyneaux and Dr Paisley returned to see the Secretary of State at 1705 hrs, immediately after the meeting with Mr Hume had finished. The Secretary of State said that Mr Hume had reported having an amicable conversation with the Unionists. The SDLP had crossed the rubicon in coming to Parliament Buildings, and of course even if the talks themselves moved to Stormont Castle, the delegation offices would have to remain in Parliament Buildings. It was a "nice" suggestion, but it would now be better to stay in Parliament Buildings. Continuing, the Secretary of State said that Dr Alderdice had asked that discussions continue until a decision was made about the venue. Mr Hume and himself were not of that view. The problem was more likely to be resolved the following day rather than that evening. If it were not resolved the following day, the process would be in severe difficulty.

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32. Mr Molyneaux doubted whether the situation would change that evening. Dr Paisley expressed willingness to continue, but it seemed to him that an impasse had been reached. The Secretary of State said that Mr Hume was content to alternate the venue for Strand 2 and about the rhythm of alternation, such as two weeks in one place, followed by two in the other. He had positive reasons for a venue within the island of Ireland, and his own constituency to consider. If the whole Strand took place in London, it would confirm allegations about "partition" talks or "status quo" talks. Both Mr Molyneaux and Dr Paisley said they valued the ability to talk to Mr Hume in a businesslike and cordial way on a variety of matters.

33. The Secretary of State suggested that discussions should resume at 1030 hrs the following day. The media would be told simply that a series of meetings had taken place, and that these would continue the following day.

Dr Alderdice

34. Dr Alderdice came to see the Secretary of State at 1715 hrs, immediately after the Unionist leaders. The Secretary of State explained that he had received Dr Alderdice's message. Neither Mr Hume nor the Unionists thought that substantial progress would be made that evening. Since he had last seen Dr Alderdice, he had met with Mr Hume and with the Unionist leaders. The latter had explained why they favoured London as the venue for the second Strand. The Unionists had subsequently met with Mr Hume for a cordial meeting. Mr Hume had explained the concession the SDLP had made in agreeing to meet in Parliament Buildings; the Unionists had then said they would be content to meet in Stormont Castle, but the SDLP had already crossed their rubicon in this respect.

35. Continuing, the Secretary of State said he was inclined to end business for the day, and begin meeting again at 1030 hrs the following day. The press line would be simply that meetings had taken place all day, and they would resume the following day. If the problem was not resolved the following day, then the talks

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process might have to end. Dr Alderdice said he was not clear why resolution of the problem would be easier the following day. He was not encouraged by the various statements that had been issued during the day from Unionist sources. The Secretary of State said that the point had been made to them that perceptions were more important than facts, and the Unionist position and statements reflected a commitment to decisions taken the previous year.

36. Dr Alderdice then asked whether his earlier suggestion that the four Party Leaders meet had been turned down by the Unionists. The Secretary of State explained that it had been thought that this would not be helpful at that time. Dr Alderdice said he took it that such a meeting would not necessarily be completely unhelpful at a later stage. What was the Unionists' response to the proposal to continue meeting in Parliament Buildings? The Secretary of State said that while the Unionists would not rule out somewhere in Northern Ireland, he thought that for them it could not be in Parliament Buildings because of the constitutional implications and the visit of Lamass. Moreover, he doubted whether the Government of the Republic would agree to come to Stormont. Dr Alderdice responded that for the vast majority of the population of Northern Ireland, it would be illogical to hold the talks anywhere else. The Secretary of State said that he thought that the Unionists had misread the position of the Irish Government, interpreting it as accepting London, whereas it was accepting London as well as Dublin. Now the Unionists had to overcome the perception that their going to Dublin would be interpreted as some form of surrender. He had seen the Unionist leaders three times that afternoon, and they were fully cognizant of the reality of the situation. Dr Mawhinney added that he had found them quieter and more realistic than had been the case on Friday.

37. The meeting ended at 1730 hrs.

Signed

A J D PAWSON
Private Secretary

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