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TSG (2/4)

TALKS STEERING GROUP

Minutes of the meeting in the VCR on Friday 8 May, 9am.

Those Present:

London

Mr Thomas  
Mr Alston  
Mr Bell  
Mr Allsop  
Mr Cooke  
Mr D A Hill  
Mr D J R Hill  
Mr Percival  
Mr Brooker  
Ms Lodge  
Mr Smith  
Mr Archer  
Mr Hallett  
Mr Thorpe

Belfast

Mr Watkins  
Mr Dodds  
Mr Maccabe  
Mr Campton  
Mr Marsh

The weeks proceedings

1. Mr Thomas began with a brief resume of the weeks proceedings in the talks. It had, he reflected, been a very good week: there had been 4 Plenary sessions, 3 Business Committee meetings and a separate sub-Committee meeting to discuss "identities". In the Secretary of State's terminology, we had "parked" the Realities paper (though the DUP had promised to respond) and "banked" the Common Themes paper. The paper Options for New Political Institutions had been discussed in Plenary and had resulted in an agreed paper entitled Common Principles, which reflected agreed common ground between the four parties and the Government on the underlying principles effecting any new political institutions.

2. There had been preliminary discussion on the next part of the paper, Institutional Arrangements. The two Unionist teams and the Alliance accepted the framework of devolution to a single province-wide assembly and all its trappings. The SDLP however suggested that this paper was premature and of the wrong kind - it needed to be "innovative" and reflect the nature of the problem.

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The conflict between the two approaches could have given rise to problems. However, a sub-Committee was delegated to discuss John Hume's paper "The Nature of the Problem" and papers were tabled by the other parties in response and an agreed position reached. This went quite well and it is to be hoped gives John Hume the cover he requires for his structures paper. It was agreed that the four parties would present papers to the Secretary of State on Monday on their proposed institutional arrangements. If the Secretary of State deemed these papers suitable for discussion, Plenary would then appoint a sub-Committee, to meet on the following Tuesday and Wednesday to report to Plenary on Friday 15 May.

3. Mr Bell added that he had been struck by the encouraging "buzz" at the end of each session and in addition the sub-Committees seemed to be performing better than expected.

Handling of Strand 1

4. Mr D J R Hill saw a possible problem in the handling of the "two world" approaches - the more pragmatic approach of the Unionist/Alliance parties as opposed to the innovative ideas of the SDLP. However, after discussion, it was considered to be less of a problem than originally thought - there was enough common ground to have a debate on Strand 1 issues alone without moving into areas of Strand 2. Mr Hill commented that generally the DUP papers were being carefully drafted to pick up on SDLP themes and language. Mr Thomas mused that perhaps the Scribes were taking over from the Pharisees.

Possible Solution

5. Mr Cooke introduced discussion on his paper by saying that he had used the UK negotiating papers to produce a package that might help Ministers focus on the end point of the talks. It was a simplified position, leaving out a myriad of options and trade offs - it was specifically not for tabling. Discussion concentrated in particular on the European aspects and the accommodation of the SDLP

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position. Mr Archer commented that some of the ideas of the SDLP were starkly unrealistic, such as the appointment of a commissioner by the Community. It was agreed that the submission might be adjusted to cover these points but not the paper. Mr Cooke said he would put forward the paper to Ministers by close of play.

General approach to Strand 2

6. The meeting discussed the issues raised in Mr Alston's minute, which mapped out the work and actions required for a successful transition to Strand 2. The various actions identified on general issues, Sir Ninian Stephen and Mr Thompson, were all agreed. It was considered prudent that if any briefing for Mr Thompson's initial visit was to include elements of "seed-sowing" on the handling of Strand 2, this ought to be made up into a submission to Ministers on handling Strand 2 as a whole.

Discussion papers

7. It was noted that the only papers outstanding are those on Legislative Procedures, the European Community and the current Constitutional Arrangements. The majority of papers would be put up to Ministers this week end.

AOB

8. It was noted that President Robinson intended to visit Londonderry on 15 May. It was not considered that this would affect the talks in any way.

wrong date.

9. It was agreed that the next meeting should be held on 14 May.

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