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FROM: PS/SECRETARY OF STATE  
24 MAY 1990



cc. PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - B  
PS/Minister of State (L&B) - B  
PS/Dr Mawhinney (L&B) - B  
PS/PUS (L&B) - B  
PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B 2, Pd 2  
Mr Burns - B cc Mr Spence  
Mr Ledlie - B 25/5  
Mr Thomas - B  
Mr Alston - B  
Mr Wood (L&B) - B  
Mr D J R Hill - B  
Mr J McConnell - B  
Mr Blackwell - B  
Mr Daniell - B  
Dr Donnelly - B

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

MEETING WITH THE SDLP: 24 MAY 1990

and Dr. Mawhinney

The Secretary of State had a meeting in the Conference Room in NIO(L) today with John Hume MP, leader of the SDLP, and his two Parliamentary colleagues (Seamus Mallon MP and Eddie McGrady MP). PUS, Sir K Bloomfield, Mr Burns, Mr J McConnell and I were also present. The meeting began at 12.20pm.

2. The Secretary of State began by thanking Mr Hume and his colleagues for coming in to see him at short notice and at a potentially inconvenient time. He believed that an important stage had now been reached in the political life of Northern Ireland and he wanted to keep the SDLP in the picture and to hear their views. His objective in the series of political talks he had been having with the parties had always been to establish whether there was sufficient common ground to make inter-party talks worthwhile and to find a basis on which they could take place. The SDLP had of course always been willing to participate in such talks and he was glad to say that the Unionists were now

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also willing to do so. Whereas at previous meetings he had occasionally felt that the Unionist leaders were not full-heartedly committed to making progress, his clear judgment after the latest meeting was that they were now genuinely concerned to move forward. Critically, they had specifically accepted that the process of discussion would encompass all three relationships and that they would participate in the North/South discussions as well as the internal ones. (The third strand, the East/West dialogue, was of course primarily for the two Governments.)

3. Continuing, the Secretary of State said that it was still his view that the ultimate achievement of new agreed political institutions remained possible rather than probable, but the process had continued to inch forward and he believed that there was now a widespread commitment to realistic dialogue. In his judgement there was now an important opportunity for inter-party talks which must not be wasted. Much detailed work would be necessary. If all the parties were willing to move ahead, he would envisage arrangements for talks on the following lines. First, there would be bilateral meetings between the parties and officials to clear the ground. These would be preparatory meetings on "nuts and bolts" issues, not substantive negotiations. Next, the "pre-gap" Conference would take place, followed by the announcement of the gap. This would specify the date of the Conference meeting which would close the gap; and both Governments were clear that it would be essential to stick to that closing date. As the first event in the gap, he would then quickly hold a round of bilateral meetings with the parties, and would then have a plenary inter-party session (essentially to ensure that everyone was working from the same assumptions). There might then be a need for more bilaterals before the round-table inter-party talks started in earnest. He would expect to be in regular contact with the Irish Government as this process developed, and indeed hoped to see Mr Collins early next week. These arrangements posed no threat whatever to the

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Agreement, which remained as the "bedrock" of North/South relations, nor was it envisaged that there should be any suspension of the Conference (apart, of course, from the gap in Conference meetings) or the Secretariat. It was essential for the success of this proposal that the two Governments should stand together, and he was pleased to say that this was the case.

4. Responding, Mr Hume said that the circumstances of the present meeting had been complicated by the behaviour of the Unionist leaders after the meeting on Tuesday. While they had pretended to say little, there had been an implicit triumphalism in their demeanour which had created deep anxiety in the nationalist community. Many nationalists had assumed that they had been given what they wanted, and it was therefore reassuring to hear the Secretary of State say that there was no question of any suspension of the Conference or Secretariat. He would however be grateful for clarification on a number of points. First, what was the purpose of the bilateral meetings with officials? The Secretary of State said that these would be meetings between officials and each of the parties who were committed to making political progress, with the aim of resolving the "housekeeping" issues - for example looking at diaries, drawing up a basic agenda for meetings, etc. They would not be negotiations.

5. Mr Hume asked whether, since the Unionists were now willing to participate in the process, they had effectively dropped their preconditions? The Secretary of State said that the Unionist leaders had agreed earlier that his letter of 4 May fully met their first precondition. As regards the second precondition, the Unionists had accepted that any talks should take place in a pre-defined gap between Conference meetings. On the third precondition, which concerned the working of the Secretariat, he believed that the Unionists understood the realities. He had explained to them the range of activities undertaken by the Secretariat (some of which were new to them). He had also

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stressed that the Agreement was an international treaty which HMG could not possibly unilaterally abrogate. Nor would the two Governments be willing to abandon the resource offered by the Secretariat during the period of the gap. The Secretariat would therefore continue to reside at Maryfield. Of course, because there would be a pre-defined gap between Conference meetings, there would be some things which the Secretariat would for that period not be required to do. He would be discussing the precise details with Mr Collins to ensure that they were at one on them.

6. Mr Hume said that he assumed therefore that activity in the Secretariat during the gap would be precisely the same as during other intervals between Conference meetings. The Secretary of State said that the Secretariat would of course continue to be resident in Maryfield and would undertake a number of activities, and he had made that clear to the Unionists. However, the fact that the date for the next Conference meeting would, uniquely, be announced in advance did distinguish this gap from other intervals between Conferences, and there would be a commensurate effect on activities in the Secretariat.

7. Mr Hume asked what wording had been agreed on the first precondition. The Secretary of State quoted from his 4 May letter (making clear that this was a publicly available document). In response to further questions from the SDLP leader, the Secretary of State repeated that the Unionists were willing to discuss the three relationships in three strands of talks (although, as previously noted, they and the other Northern Ireland parties would not be involved in the East/West talks). The Unionists had specifically agreed to take part in direct North/South conversations at the appropriate time. Because he knew that this was a key area he had tested the Unionists' position on it "almost to destruction" at the Tuesday meeting, and was entirely satisfied that there was no ambiguity in their commitment to participate in talks with Dublin. Mr Hume said that journalists had suggested to the SDLP that the Unionists'

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real intention was to prolong the series of bilateral meetings with officials so as to avoid the necessity of ever actually having to come to the table with the other parties. The Secretary of State said that he had no grounds for thinking that this was the case. The Unionists had specifically said that when he invited them to round-table inter-party talks, they would accept.

8. Mr Mallon asked whether it was correct that there would be no change in the numbers employed in the Secretariat. The Secretary of State indicated that he always made clear that the Joint Heads of the Secretariat would be liable to move. Mr Mallon asked whether it was settled that all the Secretariat members, apart from the Joint Heads, would stay in Maryfield and perform their normal tasks other than those which would no longer be necessary because of the gap between Conference meetings. The Secretary of State said that this was the case. In response to a question from Mr McGrady, the Secretary of State said that he would envisage that the SDLP, the DUP, the UUP and the Alliance Party, but no others, would be participating in the talks process. In respect of the length of the gap envisaged, he believed that this should be not less than two months, but he would of course need to agree the precise duration with Mr Collins.

9. Mr McGrady asked whether he had correctly understood that the Joint Heads would be servicing the political talks during the gap. The Secretary of State stressed that they would not be servicing the internal talks but would be involved in those in which the two Governments participated (that is, the East/West and North/South strands). In response to a question from Mr Mallon, the Secretary of State said that the internal talks would be serviced by NIO officials, with the parties involved doubtless having their own staff supporting them. Mr McGrady asked what the Unionists had meant when they had said, after the Tuesday meeting, that they had now concluded this series of meetings. The Secretary of State said that that was really a

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question for the Unionists themselves. However, he assumed that they had meant that they regarded themselves as having completed the "talks about talks" stage. Mr McGrady asked how it was, given what the Secretary of State had now told them, that the Unionists had felt able to express satisfaction with the outcome of their Tuesday meeting. The Secretary of State said that the Unionists had clearly come a long way and were now showing a genuine commitment to realistic political dialogue. He had been frank with them (as with the SDLP) to ensure that no one could claim that they had been drawn into talks under false pretences. He had made clear that the Agreement was not going to be abrogated nor the Secretariat abandoned. He noted what Mr Hume had said about the Unionist demeanour after the Tuesday meeting. It would of course be extremely helpful, if not crucial, in maintaining the momentum of the political process for all parties to abstain from triumphalism and maintain "radio silence" as far as possible.

10. Mr Mallon asked who would be involved in the internal talks. The Secretary of State said that the coverage would be NIO Ministers and officials, the SDLP, the DUP, the UUP and Alliance. Mr Mallon said that the Irish Government should also have a place at the table. The Secretary of State said that he had agreed with the Irish that they had no place in the internal discussions. Mr McGrady asked at what stage the internal talks would broaden to include direct contact between the Unionists and the Dublin Government on North/South relations? The Secretary of State recalled that at the 20 February meeting Mr Hume had commented that, while it would be necessary for the Unionists to talk to the Dublin Government as part of the overall process, such contact did not have to be the first step in that process. He believed that when the internal talks had made substantive progress the time would probably be right for a meeting with Dublin.

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11. Mr Hume said that the SDLP certainly could not contemplate entering into lengthy talks on the internal position which put the realities of the three relationships on the long finger. It was essential for all three relationships to be fully addressed, so that at the end of the process the SDLP would have legitimate authority from all the people of Ireland to "take on" the gunmen. The Secretary of State said that he wholly agreed that an end to violence was a central (if perhaps slightly longer term) objective of the overall process. Could he take it from what had been said that the SDLP was committed to participating in inter-party talks? Mr Hume said that he would need to consult his colleagues before giving a formal response on that point. The SDLP team accordingly withdrew to confer; this period of non-implementation of the meeting lasted for approximately an hour (between 1.05pm and 2.05pm).

12. On returning, Mr Hume said that the preliminary reaction of the SDLP MPs was that what the Secretary of State had said offered very good grounds for progress, although it also contained some areas of doubt. The prospect of entering into talks involving all three relationships was very encouraging. But the SDLP had two questions:

- (i) At what stage would the initial talks on an internal settlement broaden to include the North/South dimension, and would the timing of this be publicly announced in the initial statement?
- (ii) What precisely would the Irish Joint Head of the Secretariat be doing during the gap?

The Secretary of State said that he had not discussed with the Unionists whether the initial statement announcing the start of the process should include a reference to the broadening out of the talks. But he had got a definite commitment from the Unionists that the talks would expand into contact with Dublin.

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and that they would participate in them. On the Joint Heads, they would, as he had said, be involved in the two strands of talks involving the Governments. While the Unionists might prefer that this involvement was not publicly specified, they had accepted absolutely that the two Governments had every right to employ their officials to support the talks as they saw fit.

Mr Hume asked whether, since the Joint Heads would not be involved in the internal talks (and since these were being taken first), they would during that period remain in Maryfield. The Secretary of State said that this was the case.

13. Mr Hume said that the SDLP would now report back to their party and would also talk to the Irish Government. It was worth stressing that their agenda for the talks would include, as a major feature, the question of how and when the internal dialogue could be "legitimised" by being placed in the wider North/South context. The Secretary of State said that he would not instruct his officials to begin their bilaterals on the practicalities before he had a firm understanding that all the parties were committed to the process. Would the SDLP like another meeting at which, after consulting others in the party, they could confirm formally that they were on board? Mr Hume said that he would certainly communicate the party's decision to the Secretary of State through one means or another. Mr Burns said that it might well be advantageous to have a further meeting, since this would permit a rapid resolution of supplementary questions which might well arise as a consequence of the SDLP's decision. The Secretary of State said that the prospect of a further meeting with the SDLP would also make it easier for him to enjoin discretion on the Alliance Party when he met them.

Sir K Bloomfield said that it would be to everyone's advantage if none of the parties broke cover prematurely to publicise the details of the understandings which had been reached.

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14. Mr Hume said that he and his colleagues would clearly have to say something to the waiting press. If he specified that there would be no suspension of the Secretariat, would that make life difficult for the Unionists? The Secretary of State said that after the Tuesday meeting, the Unionists had agreed not to go into detail with the press. It would be most helpful if the SDLP could take the same line (at least until he had had the opportunity to speak to Mr Collins). After some discussion, Mr Hume said that he would try to stick to the line that they had had an interesting and promising discussion with the Secretary of State, but some areas still remained to be clarified. The SDLP leadership would be pursuing further consultations with party officials and members. The Secretary of State said that that would be a most helpful line.

15. In a parting query, Mr Mallon asked for confirmation that the Joint Heads of the Secretariat would remain at Maryfield when they were not servicing the East/West and North/South talks. The Secretary of State said that this was the understanding.

16. Although the SDLP evinced manifest suspicion at the start of the meeting about the position the Secretary of State had reached with the Unionists, this appeared to dissipate in the course of discussion (except perhaps in the case of Mr Mallon) to be replaced by a more constructive, if wary, attitude. Mr Hume was generally successful in the impromptu press conference after the meeting in confining himself to cautious but unspecific optimism.

Signed:

S J LEACH  
PRIVATE SECRETARY  
24 MAY 1990

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