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RJA/525/91/sh

FROM: R J ALSTON
US(POL)

UNDER/ 806/b
SEC
27 JUN 1991
CENT SEC

258

PS/Mr Feil - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr D J R Hill - B
Mr McNeill - B
Mr Cooke - B
Mr Archer - B
HM Ambassador, - B

MR PILLING - B

27/b

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POLITICAL TALKS: TIMETABLE

You mentioned at the Secretary of State's briefing meeting this morning our intention to put to him tonight a minute sketching out the present situation as we see it, and suggesting one or two immediate lines of action over the next few days.

2. I attach a draft which we might discuss during the lunch recess. If BLIS recipients have any comments it would be valuable if these could reach my Stormont House office by 4.00 pm.

[signed]

R J ALSTON
Ext 2507

The message would be broken if the 15 July 1991 was cancelled or postponed, or if the Unionists accepted a formula for continuing talks even if it is held. We will propose or overtly encourage

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FROM: R J ALSTON
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June 1991

cc PS/MofS (L&B) - B
PS/PUS (L&B) - B
PS/Mr Fell - B
Mr Pilling (L&B) - B
Mr Thomas (L&B) - B
Mr D J R Hill (L&B) - B
Mr McNeill - B
Mr Cooke - B
Mr Dodds - B
Mr Archer, RID - B
HMA, Dublin - B

PS/SofS (L&B) - B

POLITICAL TALKS: TIMETABLE

At the Secretary of State's briefing meeting this morning it was agreed that it was premature to reach a judgement as to whether there was a realistic chance of reaching the present impasse about the holding of the IGC, or whether we were in effect engaged in bringing the present process to a conclusion in a way which would maximise chances of picking up the threads later. This minute analyses the options open to us for seeking to bring about the former. It does not attempt to reach definitive conclusions but suggests some action which might be taken in the next three or four days.

2. The impasse would be broken if the 16 July IGC was cancelled or postponed, or if the Unionists accepted a formula for continuing talks even if it is held. We will not propose or overtly encourage

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postponement. Any move would have to come from the Irish side. At present this looks very improbable. The Taoiseach clearly took the view prior to the Downing Street meeting that the symbolism of holding the Conference was more important than seeking an early meeting of Strand II. It was however clear from the Downing Street record that the Taoiseach attaches enormous importance to the process, although he continues to see it developing over a longer timescale than either we or the Unionists would contemplate at present. The Irish position hitherto has been based on the judgement that this is a test of wills with the Unionists and that they will ultimately back down. If it became absolutely clear that they were not going to do so, and that the result would be a fracturing of the process in a way in which its restoration could not be guaranteed, the Taoiseach would probably wish to review the position though there would still be no guarantee that he would take a different view. Immediate agreement to a lengthy further gap would be unlikely, and some quid pro quo would be needed to demonstrate that the Unionists had not simply had their way. Possibilities (which would have to be firmly settled with the other parties) might include an early token meeting of Strand II, the initial meeting of Strand II taking place on 16 July, or (if an earlier token meeting of Strand II seemed possible) even an opening meeting of Strand III on 16 July. It is probably premature to take thinking on these options further forward at this stage. What is however clear is that any chance, however remote, of a change in the Irish position depends on our convincing them that there is little chance that the Unionists will blink.

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3. This need not deter us from continuing to explore ways on which the Unionists might agree to continue the process after 16 July. The present position looks firm and the Secretary of State has been careful not to permit anyone to imply that he believes otherwise. However, the language used in the past two or three days, for example in the letter dated 24 June and by Peter Robinson in the Business Committee, appears to have been carefully chosen, and we know that Peter Robinson will work to keep the options open if at all possible.

4. If the Unionists wish to stand on the point of principle, there is little or nothing we can do to fault the logic of their position. There are however a number of possible ways of proceeding which could help in the presentation of a change of heart if the will to make one existed. They are complementary rather than alternatives, and all would need to be based on the premise that what followed 16 July was the working out of the March 26 process and not a resumption. The central element would probably be the presentation of a gap within the Talks process to accommodate the seven weeks lost and the summer holiday period within which a meeting of the IGC would take place. When the Talks continue this would presumably be for a period at least equal to whatever we then judged had been lost, but the process could be made to look more attractive if the two governments were in practice able to offer a

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considerably longer gap, say of some three months from the beginning of September. Presentationally the 16 July Conference in the course of such a gap could also be made to look slightly more palatable to unionists if it had a strong emphasis on security. It would in any event be essential to ensure that it did not deal with the political process as such.

5. If there is to be any chance of something on these lines working it will be essential to maintain momentum and give the Unionist leaders a sense that there is a real chance of substantive progress if talks continue. Timing will be of critical importance. In this it will be important that any moves we make should compliment the judgement of those within the Unionist parties who would like to see this issue disposed of. This in turn makes it desirable to maintain discreet contacts on these issues.

6. Putting together any such arrangement would involve judgements on several issues which would require consultation with the Irish. These include the question of whether there would be a single IGC within any gap (preferable in terms of saleability to Unionists) or two (an additional pill for Unionists but more likely to permit the Irish to agree to leave the autumn months clear of Conferences). Closely related to this would be the issue of how long a renewed gap should be, bearing in the mind the strong arguments for simply avoiding a re-run of the present situation at

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ome moment in the Autumn. Finally, we would need detailed agreement with the Irish on the terms in which the gap was going to be presented in public.

7. If neither of these two outcomes can be brought about, and neither can be said to be more than an outside runner at present, we would have to assume that our aim would be to end the present process in early July on a basis which provided the best possible platform for a resumption at some time in the future. This would however require a clear break in the process, and a further period of talks about talks to draw up new ground rules. It would clearly be desirable to maintain momentum and do this in a way which would permit a new process to begin in September. The most immediate factor working against this is the holiday season. Over and above that it is difficult to judge how ready the Unionist leaders in particular will be to get back into talks, and whether they may seek to introduce new provisions which would make the Talks about Talks process again a protracted one, with the risk that the certainty of a General Election in the first half of 1992 would in practice prevent early movement.

8. Given that there are two ways of resolving the impasse, and that it is genuinely difficult to judge at present that one has a better chance of success than the other, there are strong arguments for working on both at least for the next few days. On this basis I recommend that:

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- (a) the Minister of State should seek to establish discreet contact with Peter Robinson in the next few days to explore whether there is any chance of putting together a package which would permit the Unionist leaders to agree to a continuation of the process after a gap, drawing on the ideas outlined above;
- (b) in various contacts which Mr Pilling, HM Ambassador and I will be having with the Irish in the next few days we should set out in fairly stark terms the judgement that we see no chink in the Unionist position at this stage, and that the consequence is likely to be a fracturing of the process in which there is no guarantee of speed or terms on which it could be resumed. This would set the tone of consideration in Dublin, and might be reinforced by some kind of direct communication from the Secretary of State to Mr Collins in the course of next week if it seems likely that we shall fail to find a way forward with the Unionists. An element of the position is that we should decline to be drawn with the Irish into discussions of devices for helping the Unionists on the grounds that we see no realistic prospect at present that they will enter into such a discussion.

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