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From: PS/Secretary of State (B)
7 May 1997

cc: PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - 0
PS/Mr Murphy (B&L) - 0
PS/Mr Worthington (DENI, DHSS&L) - 0
PS/Sir David Fell - 0
Mr Thomas - 0
Mr Steele - 0
Mr Stephens - 0
Mr Watkins - 0
Mr Leach - 0
Mr Brooker - 0
Mr Warner - 0

Mr Maccabe - 0

MEETING WITH DR ALDERDICE: 6 MAY 1997

As part of her series of meetings with political party leaders, the Secretary of State met Lord Alderdice in Stormont Castle yesterday morning. Mr Murphy, PUS, Mr Thomas and I were present.

2. Lord Alderdice began by giving his assessment of the General Election results in Northern Ireland. Personally he was very pleased with the Alliance Party's performance. Jim Hendron in East Belfast had polled well despite the media having played up the main contest as being between the DUP and UUP candidates. Overall, the Party's vote had risen from 6½ to 8%. The local government elections, however, were more important for the Party. He was confident of a good showing on 21 May as he believed the Party had a sound wide electoral base.

3. On the wider Northern Ireland scene, overall results were not the worst possible but they headed in that direction. He believed next time around Sinn Fein would obtain three seats - they

Minister

*cc Mr Watkins
Mr Caplan*

To note para 6. If we are contacted by the Alliance Party about this, are you content to meet them?

*Colin
7/5*

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were not too far off in West Tyrone. He believed the SDLP would still come out with more local council seats than Sinn Fein although he thought the effect of the Westminster election results would be that Sinn Fein would eat into the SDLP's strength.

4. On the unionist side, although the DUP had not done well in the General Election, he believed they would do much better at local government level where they had a much stronger base. Admittedly, the UUP had won one extra seat but, he believed, in other respects, it was not a great election result for them.

5. Discussion then turned to parades with the Secretary of State confirming that the Government would implement the North recommendations in full and this would be part of the Queen's speech. The legislation, however, may not be in place in time for this summer's parades as there was much competition for Parliamentary time. Indeed, she thought that it might be counter-productive were the Commission to be handed powers as late as June. Lord Alderdice suggested the Government might consider a public statement that, although the Commission's powers may not be in place, this summer, nevertheless, the Government would take any advice the Commission offered on contentious parades extremely seriously. This would, he believed, counter claims that the Commission was only a paper tiger. The Secretary of State thought this a helpful suggestion on which she would reflect further. On what Lord Alderdice might say to the media, she said it would be helpful if he said that she had confirmed that the Government was determined to implement the North recommendations in full as soon as practicable, although there were Parliamentary constraints on timing.

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6. Lord Alderdice then turned to the subject of incorporation of the ECHR in Northern Ireland legislation. He had it in mind to bring forward a Bill but only if that would not present the Government with problems. The Secretary of State said there was a commitment to bring the ECHR in for the UK as a whole: she was unclear what differences existed for Northern Ireland over the rest of GB. She had, up to now, been considering packaging it around the talks process. She suggested Lord Alderdice should speak to Tony Worthington who would have responsibility in that area. She noted that the Home Secretary was very keen for incorporation of ECHR into UK law. Mr Thomas suggested the outcome might be one Bill for the whole of the UK with possible add-ons for Northern Ireland.

7. On the prospects for the talks, Lord Alderdice's belief was that there was no chance of getting agreement amongst the parties in Northern Ireland. That said, the Government's devolution plans for Scotland and Wales might help create a constitutional dynamic. On prospects for a ceasefire, he encouraged the Secretary of State to continue with the line she was taking with Sinn Fein ie it's their responsibility; Sinn Fein had to prove they were committed to exclusively peaceful methods; others needed to know that they were for real.

He did not believe, however, that a ceasefire would be called until at least after the general election in the Republic and the identity of the Taoiseach was known.

John McKerrill

J MCKERVILL
Private Secretary