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POLITICAL AFFAIRS DIVISION
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PS/Secretary of State

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TALKS - 8 APRIL 1998 (MORNING): STRAND 1

Summary

Mr Murphy held bilateral meetings on Strand 1 this morning with the UDP, SDLP and Labour. The PUP volunteered to stand down their 10am meeting to enable Mr Murphy to greet the Prime Minister on his arrival at Castle Buildings, but left open the possibility that a meeting could be reinstated this afternoon. The Minister was accompanied by Mike Gapes MP, Peter May and myself. The underlying mood among the parties was that a deal was still possible, though the SDLP felt they were now more vulnerable on Strand 1.

Detail

PUP

2. In the absence of a ministerial meeting, the PUP confirmed to officials that they favoured Assembly elections based on the 18x6+20 model.

UDP (10.35am)

3. An upbeat UDP delegation, comprising Gary McMichael, David Adams and John White, began by confirming that their principal difficulties with the Mitchell paper centred on the amount of detail on North South bodies (Annexes A, B & C) and the legislative basis for these. Mr Adams emphasised that the unionist parties were not "game-playing" and that their reaction yesterday had been based on the fact that the paper was unsellable to their constituency. They were concerned that the idea of mutual destruction between Strands 1 and 2 had not been built in, despite this being agreed with the Taoiseach at a meeting on Sunday.

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4. On Strand 1, their key concern was the workability of any new arrangements. They favoured:

- an executive which would exercise collective responsibility, but would not be seen as a coalition;
- a top-up system for Assembly elections (though they could live with 18x6); and
- weighted majorities, triggered by an appropriate percentage, for contentious decisions (but agreed to think about our alternative proposals).

5. They saw the need for a code of conduct (rather than “duty of service”), and thought that any mechanism for dealing with those who do not enjoy the confidence of the Assembly should be kept as simple and at as high a level as possible. They also raised the issue of accessibility to Castle Buildings after an agreement is reached.

SDLP (11.20am)

6. The SDLP delegation was made up of John Hume, Seamus Mallon, Sean Farren and Mark Durkan. Mallon complained that the coalescing of the unionist parties and Alliance had been a bad omen for a future Assembly and had raised fears among nationalists. This made the SDLP more vulnerable on Strand 1. Sean Farren went through their list of proposed amendments, which differed from the version in our possession, though he was challenged on a number of points by Mallon (who was obviously unsighted on the detail). The main points discussed were:

- a proposed special committee on equality;
- the need to clarify the role of the First and Second Secretaries in respect of executive dismissals, and to avoid “vexatious” motions on loss of Assembly

confidence (on which Mr May tabled some draft language for them to take away and consider); and

- vesting executive power in Secretaries rather than Committees.

Labour (12.10pm)

7. The Labour team, comprising Malachy Curran, William White and John Wright, was committed to:

- a strong executive with collective responsibility;
- a top-up system for Assembly elections (initially 18x5+20, to provide continuity, and thereafter 18x5+10, based on proportionality), with the primary aim of keeping the UDP on board;
- weighted majorities for the selection of Chairman and Deputy Chairman, budget allocations and standing orders; and
- a scrutiny role for committees (along the lines of a Commons Select Committee), but no responsibility for determining policies and priorities.

8. Mr Curran reported that Labour's meeting with the Prime Minister had been excellent. He had told Mr Blair the lists on Strand 2 had been a mistake, since this should have been left up to an Assembly, and claimed that Labour had got unionists close to agreement on producing such lists a week and a half ago.

(Signed)

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