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From: T Watson
Constitutional and Political Division
13 May 1998

cc (see below)

Note for the Record

MINISTER OF STATE'S MEETING WITH DAVID TRIMBLE - 12 MAY

Yesterday afternoon, around 16.35, Mr Murphy, Mr Hill and I met David Trimble for approximately 55 minutes. The UUP leader was unaccompanied. Although a number of other issues were touched on, the main thrust of the discussion focused on what measures the Government and, in particular, the Prime Minister, might yet take to bolster the unionist "yes" campaign in the final days before the referendum. The meeting was conducted in a cordial atmosphere throughout.

Urgent Action Points

2. Mr Trimble outlined his view that Lord Molyneaux would be making a further public statement outlining his opposition to the Agreement on Friday of this week. The UUP leader said he had contacted Mr Holmes (No. 10) on this issue with a proposal that the Prime Minister should have a further word with Lord Molyneaux before Friday. Mr Trimble asked that this point be reinforced by NIO. In response to a question from Mr Murphy on what more former Prime Minister Major could do in the remaining days before 22 May, Mr Trimble suggested he (Mr Major) might also be deployed to speak to Lord Molyneaux before Friday. Beyond that he had no objections to Mr Major revisiting Northern Ireland before 22 May if consideration was being given to this. Mr Murphy agreed to feed all of this into Downing Street. [ACTION: MR HILL].
3. Mr Trimble referred to a series of events on Wednesday/Thursday and in particular the Prime Minister's visit on 14 May and his planned speech at Balmoral. While the UUP leader had not yet seen a text, he understood that some of the speech would be trailed on Wednesday night in a pre recorded television session for UTV's "Insight" when the Prime Minister would engage with six to eight concerned unionists - one of whom would be from the "Jeffrey Donaldson" group. Mr Trimble proposed that, as an alternative to this, some key elements of the Prime Minister's Balmoral speech might be trailed at today's PMQ's to him (Mr Trimble) - assuming the Speaker called him. Mr Murphy again agreed to feed this point into Downing Street. [ACTION: MR HILL].
4. Continuing with the theme of forthcoming visits by the Prime Minister, Mr Trimble asked whether the NIO might propose to Downing Street that he "visibly" accompany the Prime Minister to some venue on a joint basis either this week or next. Suggestions that Coleraine or Bangor form the basis of a venue for this were outlined by the UUP leader. [ACTION: MR HILL].

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General Points

5. Mr Murphy recapped briefly on the earlier meeting with Mr McCartney and Mr Robinson and comments made by the UKUP leader who, inter alia, had sought the same focus group information as he believed had been given previously to Mr Trimble. Mr McCartney had alluded to being in possession of such information, without presenting specific evidence, and had warned of possible legal action if what had been given to the UUP leader was not provided to him. A discussion ensued as to how best this should be handled and what, if anything, might constitute a written reply to the UKUP leader. The fact that legal advice was pending as well as the possibility that the UKUP leader had been leaked the information in full was also into account. Mr Trimble urged that only headline information in Mr Kelly's minute of 11th be provided (ie 59% yes 18% no and 23% unknown) perhaps accompanied by the previous week's narrative on polling and focus groups should be provided. Mr Murphy agreed to consider replying to Mr McCartney along these lines but wished to await the outcome of legal advice. [PS/Mr Murphy to note].

6. Mr Trimble raised the Bloomfield Report and sought advance details of today's announcement. An advance copy of the Report was provided to him. Mr Murphy indicated that a three month consultation period would be invoked to ascertain best use of the £5m allocated. The UUP leader said he hoped the Disabled Police Officers Association cause would be borne in mind in such considerations. A DPOA reception on 19 May was highlighted by Mr Murphy at this point.

7. Mr Murphy touched on the Jeffrey Donaldson position which in turn led Mr Trimble to say that Lord Molyneaux was pulling the strings in this relationship and more generally across a broader coalition of dissident MPs. It was at this point that Mr Trimble referred to the text of the Prime Minister's speech and the presentational suggestions listed in paragraph 3 above. Mr Murphy suggested the legislative link which Mr Trimble continued to seek in terms of prisoners, decommissioning and "entry into office" could present a problem since there might be difficulties keeping the SDLP and Sinn Fein on board if such provisions were adopted. Mr Trimble said there was no point worrying about the SDLP and Sinn Fein now. They had nowhere else to go but still wanted the Agreement. The UUP leader suggested the time for half measures on this matter had elapsed. The prospect of losing the referendum among unionists was real and if it happened the Assembly election would go the same way leading quickly to a "disaster". Mr Trimble suggested that if the current polling figures became reality on 23 May, he would not even make it to the Assembly election. The "coalition" in the UUP ranging from Molyneaux through Ross, Thompson, Smyth, Forysthe, Beggs and Donaldson would be unstoppable on 23 May if the above polling scenario became reality. A combination of the polling figures, the events of Sunday in Dublin and Molyneaux pulling the strings meant that only 48 hours were left to try to save the process. Something was urgently needed which provided a good and positive outcome for the "yes" campaign to latch onto and put pressure on the dissidents.

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8. Mr Trimble continued his exposition of the yes campaign's chances of success by focusing on Sunday's Ard Fheis which he described as a "very bad" event. People in the unionist community would be concerned with the orchestrated display of triumphalism as a result of the prisoner releases, the fact that Sinn Fein/IRA was giving up none of its paramilitary apparatus and continued to make public comments about moving into an Assembly as only a "transitional" phase in the struggle. Unionists were unlikely to consider any deeper analysis therefore the problem of image and emotion was a very real one and this was reflected in the polling trends, particularly in the C, D and E categories. Mr Trimble pointed out that the UUP had no option but to make its selections for Assembly candidates in the week after the referendum. If a positive and clear cut result occurred, constituency associations would then have a strong mandate to select "yes" as opposed to "no" candidates who would appear in each constituency in any event. A result the other way would obviously strongly favour the no's and spell problems later on.

9. The UUP leader said the "yes" campaign was in a deficit situation. It had been running behind the no campaign last week and more recent events were likely to aggravate this gap. There was, however, still a large percentage of voters undecided. In response to Mr Murphy stating that there must surely be difficulty in accurately analysing the referendum result in terms of unionist yes's and no's, Mr Trimble pointed to the certainty of detailed exit polls appearing before the official result on Saturday 23 May. Analysis and projections of the unionist vote would quickly appear overnight and had the potential to cause difficulties - particularly if the present overall figures of 59% yes, 18% no and 23% undecided were repeated next week. Mr Trimble again asserted that an overall figure of below 60% would be bad, over 70% would be positive and workable and in between became a matter of judgement taking into account a range of circumstances, including political efficacy. The key however to ensuring the unionist "yes" campaign stood up remained focused on the single key objective of securing a legislative connection in the forthcoming Settlement Bill.

10. Mr Trimble passed across some UUP election literature. Mr Murphy outlined parliamentary business on Thursday (Election Order debate) and the potential for individuals, such as Jeffrey Donaldson, to make a statement on the record. Mr Trimble noted this and departed.

Comment

The UUP leader still appeared concerned, though not gloomy, about the latest poll information even given the slightly improved position overall. He continues to press for a hammer blow to sweep away unionist no's and sees the legislative connection and the Prime Ministers overt agreement for this as the only ammunition left. It appears that he is choosing to ignore the impact of such an approach on the SDLP and Sinn Fein and in playing a stronger role in the wider build up of political pressure on Sinn Fein that its association with those retaining weapons combined with its wish to hold office was an unsustainable position for any political organisation pursuing its objectives on a solely democratic basis. If the approach to

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the PM fails Mr Trimble is likely to consider himself as being in the "last chance saloon" - looking for a way out while avoiding any risk of mortal wounding.

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cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L)
PS/Mr Murphy (B&L)
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PS/Mr Worthington (B&L)
PS/Lord Dubs (B&L)
PS/PUS (B&L)
PS/Mr Semple
Mr Steele
Mr Jeffrey
Mr Watkins
Mr Leach
Mr McCusker
Mr Kelly
Mr Bell
Mr Shannon
Mr Brooker
Mr Maccabe
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Mr Beeton
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Mr Sanderson, Cab Off
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