

FROM: JONATHAN STEPHENS
Associate Political Director (L)
6 January 1999

CD 15
3

Mr Semple

cc PS/PUS (L&B)
Mr Jeffrey
Mr Hill
Mr Warner

POSSIBLE TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMME FOR POTENTIAL NORTHERN IRELAND MINISTERS

At a political stocktake with the Secretary of State in the London office this morning, there was some discussion of various options on the running of d'Hondt to select shadow Ministers. One idea was to avoid the difficulties of formally running d'Hondt now. Instead, the Government could announce that it would run a transitional programme intended to prepare candidates for future Ministerial office. The UUP, SDLP, DUP and Sinn Féin could each be asked to nominate Assembly members to attend such a programme. The political purpose would be to identify future Ministers in the public mind and give them a stake in the successful transfer of powers, without the difficulties of formally running d'Hondt or convening the shadow Executive Committee.

2. There are obvious political pros and cons. Trimble will doubtless see it as quite threatening; Sinn Féin would lap it up while saying it was not enough; it might help expose the DUP's readiness to take up Ministerial posts in an administration shared with Sinn Féin. The Secretary of State saw some attractions but was by no means committed. She did, however, see enough attractions to suggest that it would be worthwhile to think now about how such a transitional programme might be run, if she wanted to adopt the idea.

3. On foot of the success of the transitional programme for the Assembly, would this be something which Central Secretariat could take on? The Secretary of State said that

APDL/558

she would find the paper on what might practically go into such a transitional programme useful - for her Thursday evening box.

4. Here are some ill formed thoughts so far:

- the programme would obviously be voluntary - it would run whether or not all the parties nominated people to attend it;
- we might limit party's nominations to the number of Ministerial seats for which they will qualify, or deliberately allow them lee-way to nominate more;
- the programme would presumably need to offer enough flexibility to take account of potential sensitivities for some parties in sitting down with Sinn Féin;
- we could not identify which Minister would get which Department without formally running d'Hondt, but we could perhaps invite nominated candidates to express their interests in particular Departments and then arrange tailor-made programmes in those Departments;
- in any case, there would presumably be a number of cross-cutting issues, eg public expenditure, Europe, etc, which would be of common interest.

5. My apologies that this comes out of the blue and after we have already floated it with the Secretary of State. We have registered with her that we had no idea whether such a programme could actually be delivered or not. If she were attracted to it, then I imagine she might want it under way before the end of this month. Clearly if the Secretary of State wanted to proceed, there would be a case for consulting the FM/DFM - but we are not at that stage yet.

(Signed JAS)

JONATHAN STEPHENS
11 Millbank
Ext 6469 (Fax: 6479)

APDL/558