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14 JAN 1999

FROM: JONATHAN STEPHENS
Associate Political Director
13 January 1999

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cc. PS/PUS
PS/Mr Semple
Mr Bell
Mr D Ferguson
Mr Kelly
Mr McCusker
Mr Brooker
Mr Hill
Mr Maccabe
Mr Warner

Mr Crawford
Mr Johnston
on 11/1

this was discussed

MR JEFFREY

at this morning's CGS and given

INVOLVING THE DUP AND SINN FEIN

a fair wind by our friends

One thing we could do next week, almost regardless of what happens in the Assembly, is set up more formal liaison arrangements with the DUP and Sinn Fein, so as to involve them more fully in the preparations for the transfer of powers and their own occupation of Ministerial office. The political purpose would be, while not putting them on all fours with the First and Deputy First Minister, nonetheless to establish that the DUP and Sinn Fein alongside the UUP and SDLP are shadow Ministers in waiting and, as such, deserve to be more closely involved than other parties.

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2. The advantages are:

- these parties stand a good chance of being Ministers. The more they are involved in the preparations for that, the smoother any transition will go;
- the more both parties can get a taste for having their hands on the levers of power, the more they may have an interest in seeing power transferred;

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- from Sinn Fein's point of view, they already have a grievance about lack of formal involvement and are likely to have further grievances about the failure to operate d'Hondt immediately. This will go some way to meeting those grievances, keeping them engaged and demonstrating that there is something worth playing for;
- the DUP would be put in to something of a dilemma. They would be hard put to turn down regular liaison meetings on their own. But accepting them would carry a clear implication they would take up Ministerial office - as indeed we know is the DUP's intention. It may not be decisive, but I think it can only help to ease some of the pressure on the UUP if it becomes clearer than it is now that the DUP will take up office whether or not there is decommissioning and whether or not Sinn Fein or also involved (though they will not sit in an Executive Committee - and these liaison meetings will not ask them to do that at this stage);
- it demonstrates that the Government is doing all it can to move things forward and to act inclusively. Even where stymied on running d'Hondt itself, we nonetheless have taken our own action to ensure these two parties are included. That may help rebut at least some criticism, particularly from Sinn Fein.

3. Trimble (and Mallon? - most likely not) may object that this devalues the role of the First and Deputy First Minister, who should be pre-eminent in interpreting the 18 December Agreement and preparing generally for the transfer of powers. The answer to that would be that we are not giving the other parties an equivalent status - but equally as prospective shadow Ministers, it would be a nonsense to treat them on all fours as the PUP or other minor parties. Equally, we might point out, it is in Trimble's interest to have it demonstrated that the DUP are interested in taking up Ministerial office.

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4. We could of course set up regular meetings with these two parties with little fanfare or formality. But some at least of the advantages I have listed above are maximised by making a lot of this in presentational terms. It has potential to be an important element in our response to whatever happens in the Assembly next week.

5. The idea for some sort of "transitional programme" - directed at much the same political and presentational objectives - could then be played in to these liaison meetings. As well as discussions on preparations for the transfer of powers and consultation on the various pieces of support and legislation, we could respond positively to requests from the different parties for briefings on other issues.

6. What do you and others think? Central Secretariat's views would be particularly welcome since they would doubtless have to bear the burden of supporting such meetings along with all the others that are now underway.

(Signed)

JONATHAN STEPHENS
Political Directorate