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Government Meeting with SDLP, 19 December 1995

Summary Note

1. The meeting in Iveagh House, which lasted for one hour, took place within the preparatory talks phase of the twin track process. The Government were represented by the Tánaiste, the Minister for Justice and the Minister for Social Welfare, accompanied by Secretaries Dalton and Ó hUiginn, Mr Pat Nolan, and the undersigned as notetaker. The SDLP delegation consisted of Mr John Hume MP, Mr Seamus Mallon MP and Dr Joe Hendron MP.

All-Party Talks

2. It was agreed that the talks process must be grounded on the Joint Declaration, and should take place on the basis of the three strands and the principle that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, as in 1991-92. Any issue could be tabled for discussion. The SDLP confirmed that they had no objection to the possible involvement of Sir Ninian Stephen.
3. It was noted that Sinn Féin had privately indicated a reluctance to commit themselves to the principle of a settlement being put to a referendum. It was agreed that if this position were taken with the British Government, they could use it against Sinn Féin as evidence of a lack of commitment to the principle of consent. Mr Hume said that Sinn Féin didn't want to concede the point in advance of talks, and that they were unlikely to go public on the matter. The SDLP had been putting considerable pressure on them to commit to a referendum.
4. The Minister for Social Welfare raised the issue of the confidentiality of talks, advancing an argument for openness at all stages so that people could be brought along with the process as it developed. Mr Hume said that bonds of trust needed to be established, but that if everything were to be published, then no progress would be achieved. Confidentiality helped all participants to preserve face.

Elected Body

5. Reference was made to Trimble's confident prediction last night that elections would be held in NI early in the New Year. Mr Hume said that while there was no problem with the issue being on the agenda for talks, it could not be a precondition for talks. There was a worry that the British Government was playing politics on the issue as a result of its slender majority. The media were reporting that Trimble would meet PM Major at 5 p.m. this afternoon; the purpose of the meeting might well be to secure unionist support for the British Government in tonight's Commons vote on fisheries.
6. The Tánaiste said that the Government had made known the strong concerns of the nationalist community regarding the proposed Assembly. The SDLP considered that an Assembly would be divisive, and might well be exploited by the unionists to control the course of strand two. Ministers invited the SDLP to suggest some

alternative proposal which could get Trimble off the hook. Mr Hume said that Trimble's concept still appeared to be vague; in their last meeting Trimble had referred to an elected "body", and Trimble might elaborate on that in their meeting tomorrow. Mr Mallon noted that Trimble had said that the UUP would debate with SF in an assembly, not negotiate with them.

7. The Minister for Justice enquired whether, as a possible alternative, the joint SDLP/UUP approach in socio-economic matters could be institutionalised. Mr Hume said that the result would inevitably be an Assembly. He suggested that the two Governments should ask Trimble (i) did he agree that NI was a divided society, (ii) did he agree that divisions would have to be resolved by agreement, and (iii) if the mechanisms for agreement suggested by the Governments were not to his liking, what alternative was he proposing?

Schedule of Meetings

8. It was noted that the SDLP are due to meet the UUP tomorrow morning (as part of their ongoing contacts), and the Secretary of State tomorrow afternoon. The meeting scheduled for tomorrow morning between Alliance and the two Governments was also flagged. Mr Hume said he had met Paisley in Strasbourg last week, and another meeting was being arranged. Mr Mallon noted that a schedule of meetings was not enough without a dynamic. The Tánaiste confirmed that seeking such a dynamic would be a priority in further preparatory meetings. The Minister for Justice raised the possibility of initiating multilateral contacts below leadership level (councillors, perhaps), which could then develop their own momentum.

Punishment Beatings

9. Dr Hendron raised this issue, particularly in the context of last night's fatal shooting of Francis Collins in Belfast last night. While agreeing completely that decommissioning should not be a precondition for talks, he stressed the importance of pressing these incidents with Sinn Féin at the highest level, and referred to the possibility of the international body questioning Sinn Féin on the subject. The Tánaiste confirmed that the Government raised this issue repeatedly with Sinn Féin, so far without satisfaction. Mr Mallon noted that the key to progress on beatings lay in the development of the political process.

ED

Eugene Downes
Anglo-Irish Division

19 December 1995

cc PST, PSS, Secretary Ó hUiginn, Messrs Teahon, Murray, Donlon and Dalton, Joint Secretary, Counsellors AI, Box

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