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Secretary of State (L&B) - M.

cc PS/Mr Scott (L&B) - M
PS/Dr Mahonney (L&B) - M
PS/PUS (L&B) - M
PS/Mr Bloomfield - M
Mr Brennan
Mr Chesterton
Mr Elliott - M
Mr Gilliland - M
Mr Bell
Mr McConnell - M
Mr S Hewitt - M

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1655
15 JAN 1987
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HEAD OF THE N.I.
CIVIL SERVICE
200C 2/8

I have seen Mr Bell's note of 19 December discussing the establishment of a parallel conference for Unionists. Whilst I sympathise with some of Mr Bell's argumentation I should like to record one or two thoughts of my own.

2. As Mr Bell rightly says the re-establishment of some sort of constructive dialogue with Unionists is one of our highest priorities. That being the case, we ought perhaps to be thinking of what machinery of structure we might provide, when opportune, to help that dialogue along. If the Unionists ever were to come to us - and I am by no means suggesting that this is likely - and say that they wished to meet Government Ministers at frequent intervals to discuss agendas identical or similar to those discussed at meetings of the Anglo-Irish Conference, there would surely be no question of rejecting such an approach. On the contrary, we must respond positively to any suggestion of willingness on the part of Unionists to formalise their relationship with us, particularly if that represents, as it must in part do, an acknowledgement that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is not going to go away, and that Unionists have to come to some sort of accommodation with the Agreement still in place.

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3. I am not sure that some of the specific points put forward in Mr Bell's minute are entirely valid.

4. For instance, I suggest that the construction of a mechanism which allows formal representation of Unionist views should not necessarily make it much more difficult for Ministers to take decisions. We already know informally what the Unionist view is on any particular issue, but this has not prevented us from drawing our own conclusions and reaching what we consider to be the right decisions. Of course, the choice would on some issues be presented more starkly, but I do not think that it would be of a totally different kind. (We would of course have to avoid being bound in any way necessarily to accept proposals put to us by the Unionists; as with the IC, we must retain the ultimate power of decision). I cannot therefore accept that we should avoid consideration of new structures because the end result might place us in the position of having to make difficult decisions - that is surely what politics and Government is all about. Indeed had we taken that view it is unlikely that the Agreement would ever have been signed.

5. Mr Bell makes the points that a parallel conference for the Unionists would tend to deepen the existing sectarian division of Northern Ireland, and that the Irish would object to the institution of a Conference which would restore the imbalance by giving the Unionists a privileged position. However, I do not think that these points are fatal to the concept of a parallel conference in any form. If the Unionists were to make such an approach, we should in my view, have to respond by explaining the possibility that other constitutional parties in Northern Ireland should be given at least the opportunity to join in such a parallel conference. It may be wrong explicitly to exclude the SDLP. Provided that we took this line, I do not see that any Irish objections would be impossible for us to counter. We have always made it plain to them that we

reserved the right to carry out our own soundings of local opinion in the Province, in particular Unionist opinion, and this is what they expect of us. I do not see that the establishment of parallel means of consultation, even in the form of a conference, need take anything of significance from the Intergovernmental Conference. As to the suggestion about deepening sectarian divisions, I fear that the division is qualitatively of such a nature that quantitative judgments are secondary.

6. The offering of briefings (Mr Bell's final point), although of course we can repeat the offer we have already made, is unlikely to have any effect. I would certainly not see it as any substitute for formal consultation of the kind which a conference implies.

7. All of the above should not be taken to mean that I am sanguine about the likelihood of Unionists queuing up to talk to us in the near future. However I am firmly of the view that we should be exploring now the different options and structures that might meet Unionists' professed concerns about lack of consultation and representation should dialogue become more possible, either through an approach from local politicians or as a result of an initiative by us. The sorts of structures I am thinking of may fall short of an exact parallel with the Anglo-Irish Ministerial Conference but would have to go significantly further than a renewed offer to brief them about Conference meetings after the event.

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BRIAN MAWHINNEY

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