

C O N F I D E N T I A L

FROM CLAIRE MARSON - CPL  
12 JANUARY 1989

PS/Sir K Bloomfield - B  
Mr A W Stephens - B  
Mr Thomas - B  
Mr Miles - B  
Mr Spence - B  
Mr Kirk  
Mr Bell - B  
Mr Wood - B  
Mr Daniell - B  
Mr Masefield - B  
Mr J McConnell - B

cc Mr Burns - B



PDG MEETING THURSDAY 12 JANUARY 1989

AGENDA ITEM 2

PDG members may find it useful to have to hand the attached paper prepared by CPL in November. In the light of Ministers recently having expressed an interest in HMG appearing to be more "proactive" on the political front, the paper may provide a starting point for discussion.

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FROM CLARE MARSON - CPL  
28 NOVEMBER 1988

1. Mr Kirk
2. Mr Burns - B (and Belfast)

cc Mr Thomas - B  
Mr J McConnell - B  
Mr Wood - B

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT:  
STATEMENT OF GOVERNMENT EFFORTS TO PROMOTE DIALOGUE

We discussed last week the need for some 'defence' of the Government's position on political development in the face of any collapse of Duisburg hopes. The talks have been the main focus of Unionist interest over the past weeks (and also the Alliance party although much less so for the SDLP) and in the event of any failure to produce movement, or hope thereof, the Unionists will revert to silence or unhelpful invective. It will then be important for HMG not to be portrayed as having allowed a void to arise through inertia or, worse still, deliberate disinterest (the NIO conspiracy theory still abounds fueled only recently by comments from Powell and Molyneaux). We should be ready, therefore, with a defence of the Government's position and its efforts although the final angle of defence (robust/sympathetic) will depend upon the nature of criticism, if any. In the event of a continuing lack of apparent movement the Government may find itself receiving a bad press in which case the Secretary of State might want to counter it. We have, therefore, to answer two questions: what should be said and by what means should it be said.

What To Say

2. Setting aside the precise approach, which will need to be tailored to the occasion, the points that we should be making will be the same.

- i) Against all allegations that the Government has ignored proposals/not encouraged talks/not offered guidance, the

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facts are irrefutable. Challenge anyone to deny the truth of any one of them.

- ii) The Unionist leaders made very clear when their draft proposals were handed to the Secretary of State on 26 January that these proposals were confidential, not for publication and had been prepared for the Secretary of State's use only. Are the Unionists now criticising Mr King for honouring the agreement they asked him to make? His discretion at this time serves rather to underline the Government's genuine desire to achieve political dialogue and gives the lie to 'conspiracy' theories.
- iii) HMG has consistently shown good faith in its dealings with the Unionists. In January they agreed that as the Secretary of State had already seen them, Mr King's next step should be to meet the SDLP - which he did in March and April. He wrote to the Unionists in April saying how helpful and constructive the January meeting had been. He met them again at the beginning of May, but by the end of May the Unionists declared that the Sinn Fein/SDLP talks not only prevented their discourse with the SDLP but also with the Government. The Government understood Unionist sensitivities about Sinn Fein talks but why cut off dialogue with HMG?
- iv) In the Direct Rule renewal debate in June Mr King publicly acknowledged the constructive nature of the Unionist position and clearly stated that the next step should be inter-party dialogue.
- v) When the Sinn Fein/SDLP talks ended at the beginning of September Mr King's office contacted Unionist leaders to re-open the contacts and invited them to come and talk about security. Why then has no such meeting occurred? Why have the Unionists not responded positively?

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- vi) At the end of September the Secretary of State tried again to have talks with the Unionists when he publicly asked them through his Institute of Director's speech to discuss political matters with him. This time the Unionists' terms for a meeting (which they raised through the media) involved meeting their pre-conditions concerning the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Unionists know perfectly well that the Government is prepared to operate the Anglo-Irish Agreement sensitively in the context of political development in NI.
- vii) In October the Secretary of State wrote again to Unionist leaders inviting them to talk about political concerns. There has been no response. Does this really seem to suggest that it is the Government who is putting obstacles in the way of talks?
- viii) Mr King has kept confidences when asked to; he has met parties when they have requested it; he has publicly indicated the constructive basis of proposals put to him; he has invited the parties to discuss with him security, the Article 11 Review and political development; he has left all avenues open and has been consistently positive in his dealings with parties. What more could the Government do to indicate their interest in promising dialogue in order to work to or towards a system of devolution? Claims that HMG is in anyway uncommitted to promoting effective political development and to restoring power to locally elected representatives in Northern Ireland simply cannot be substantiated in the face of the facts.

How to say it

3. This message is not new. It has been said before but in spite of that the Unionists have somehow obtained the moral high ground by

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managing to put across their message that any apparent stalemate is a result of HMG's inaction over the Unionist draft proposals. So by whatever means HMG has already stated its case, the essential facts have not been disseminated. What we should be looking at therefore, is maximum publicity. There is a number of options to consider.

- i) Speech This would be the most easily arranged option but would not automatically result in a great deal of publicity. The occasion itself should be preferably news worthy; journalists might be tipped off beforehand and some of the leader writers brought onside to report/comment on the content of the speech.
- ii) Article by journalist A nice intellectual exercise enabling the Department to make all the right points but not necessarily read by the people on the Shankhill who need to be reached with this message. Any such article would, in effect, reach only those people who normally read the newspaper/magazine in which it appeared and we need a wider and more varied audience on this occasion.
- iii) Arranged PQ We have already done this (Reply to John Taylor on 10 November) and the problem of a select audience arises again. It may be reported by the Parliamentary correspondents in the Times and Guardian etc and even receive a few column inches on an inside page of other newspapers, but it does not make the front page of the Newsletter as do Paisley's and Molyneaux's statements that the Government has ignored their proposals.
- iv) TV Appearance
  - a) Special statement - this would certainly catch all the headlines and much attention but it has associations with 'state of emergency' or historic announcements and would create a precedent which could not (and should not) realistically be sustained.

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b) Programme appearance - one of the most attractive options because it has the advantage of reaching a wide audience and capturing attention without the disadvantage of HMG being seen to be too intense about putting its message across. However, the obvious problem is that the Government would have no control over timing and if the need is for a message within days or at least a week or two it would not be viable to consider talking to the television authorities with a view to initiating a suitable (Counterpoint type) programme.

v) Comment after an incident This would also be very effective but an incident obviously could not be stage managed; post 'incident' the Secretary of State could hang the message on something like a pre Christmas broadcast, emphasising that he had been so hopeful for political movement, or end to political stalemate etc. However the problems of precedent and lack of control would be present again.

4. Mr Wood is best placed to advise on the most effective of these methods in terms of reaching the widest audience but, after a television appearance of some sort the next most promising means appears to be a combination of a speech and an appropriately wide ranging number of journalists prepared to write it up and comment on it.

5. If Mr Burns is content with the list of points we should aim to make, and the Secretary of State agrees there is a need to make them, on Mr Wood's advice as to which media angle would be most appropriate, CPL will adapt the text.

CLAIRE MARSON  
Constitutional and Political Division  
28 November 1988