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POLITICAL TALKS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

2. For the benefit of copy recipients who have not been closely involved I should say that Mr Brooke and Mr Collins were very much conscious in their discussions last Friday of the disadvantages of the independent chairmanship proposal. This would not have been anyone's first choice; the possibility does not feature in the agreed groundrules for the Talks announced to Parliament by Mr Brooke on 26 March. The substance and tenor of exchanges on the subject at the Talks last week have, however, persuaded Mr Brooke and Mr Collins (who is not himself party to the Strand one talks but who was briefed on them by Mr Brooke on Friday) that the independent chairmanship proposal offers the best prospect of breaking potential deadlock on this particular sticking point. (Some copy recipients will know that the Unionists for the first time towards the end of last week indicated that they would play no further part if an Irish Minister were to chair or co-chair any of the meetings in Strand two.)

3. On the mechanism for agreeing the appointment, the proposal is that the name of the independent chairman would be announced by the two Governments after consultation with the Northern Ireland political parties participating in the talks. It is not intended that this should give the political parties a right of veto over candidates for the appointment. But clearly a candidate whom all

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would be content with from the outset is the ideal. The parties do ultimately have a veto, in the sense that they can walk out if the chairman is or becomes unacceptable to them.

Availability

4. The availability requirement for the appointment is set by the role of strand two of the talks process. Strand two is concerned with the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and will be the first point at which the Irish Government will participate in the talks. The timing of the move from strand one to strand two is itself a highly sensitive question, and the timing cannot be predicted precisely: it is for the Secretary of State to propose, after consultation with the parties. In practice strand two would need to start around the beginning of June. It would naturally be desirable to have found the Chairman before then to enable him to read himself in and be briefed. This means in practice that we need someone pretty well straight away. On the agreed groundrules there could be no strand two meetings (or indeed any other talks sessions) on or after 16 July. We are therefore looking for someone who could be available between now and mid-July. (There is always the possibility of a further round of talks after the Summer break, but it would be premature to take account of that now, given that the publicly stated aim is still to have completed the talks by mid-July.) However, everything else being equal, a Chairman who would be available in the Autumn as well as between now and mid-July would be desirable.

5. Strand two sessions would be likely to take place on average on three days a week, morning and afternoon. They seem likely to comprise bilaterals as well as plenary sessions. In practice an independent chairman would be likely to need at least one more day a week during Strand Two for preparation and briefing.

6. The Strand two sessions are likely to be held mainly in Northern Ireland, with an opening session in London and one towards the end of Strand two in Dublin. But this is still subject to agreement by the parties. It goes without saying that the Chairman will need to play a highly sensitive political role, including determining where Strand two meetings would be held, and when plenary sessions (apart from the initial plenary in London) would start. He may also need actively to manage the agenda in order to make progress.

What kind of person?

7. It would be an understatement to say that this is not a straightforward appointment. This paragraph suggests some possible criteria, but I would not want these to discourage the lateral thinking which I am sure we shall need.

- (i) The chairmanship of someone with a previous association with Northern Ireland political initiatives or with a well advertised preference for eg. Irish unity, confederation, power-sharing or integration is unlikely to be acceptable to all the parties.

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- (ii) We would have a hard job persuading the Unionists to accept an Irishman or even a Catholic (although this is not completely inconceivable).
- (iii) Nigel Broomfield doubted on Friday whether we could secure anyone with current EC credentials; and some individuals could in any case be associated too closely in Unionist eyes with Mr Haughey's vision of the EC. The EC also has few positive resonances for the Unionists: Dr Paisley describes it as a Popish Plot and was initially elected to the European Parliament on the platform that he would "milk the EEC cow, then slit its throat".
- (iv) We need to avoid a chairmanship which is seen as filling an arbitration or "wise man" role, or which might take on an institutional (or individual) life of its (his) own which we might regret both during and after the talks. This leads us to the tentative view that we are looking less for a shuttle diplomatist of world standing, and more for a Royal Commission - type chairman or conciliator, with a lower profile in international terms. In other words, we think we want a firm, very patient (some would say saintly) and neutral facilitator, with good chairmanship skills rather than an egocentric problem solver. Ministers will of course have views of their own. I assume the Prime Minister will need to be consulted when we have a proposal.

Terms and conditions

8. My Department will be in touch with OMCS and the Treasury about the terms and conditions of the appointment once we have a clearer idea of the level at which it is likely to be pitched. Perhaps I could put up a marker now that we may need to negotiate ad hominem terms in these special circumstances. There is a strong possibility that the Irish will insist on sharing the financial burden of this appointment, something we would not be disposed to resist though that may cause political difficulties with the Unionists.

9. I am sending copies of this letter to Robin Butler, Terry Burns, Clive Whitmore, Michael Quinlan, Peter Kemp, Juliet Wheldon and Murdo McLean. A copy also goes to Nick Fenn in Dublin, whose advice we would greatly value on any Irish candidates (whether currently resident in the Republic or not) who might conceivably prove acceptable to the parties.

Yours ever

John

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hc: Sir Robin Butler, Cabinet Office
Sir Terry Burns, HMT
Sir Clive Whitmore, Home Office
Sir Michael Quinlan, MOD
EP. Kemp, OMCS
Sir Nicholas Fenn, HMA, Dublin
Juliet Wheldon, LOD
Murdo McLean, Whip's Office
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