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PAB/7495/DGMCN/RG

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DATE: 15 OCTOBER 1991

Note for the Record

cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B  
PS/Minister of State (B&L) - B  
PS/PUS (B&L) - B  
PS/Mr Fell - B  
Mr Thomas (B&L) - B  
Mr Alston - B  
Mr Bell - B  
Mr Cooke - B  
Mr David Hill - B  
Mr Archer RID - B  
HMA Dublin - B

PETER ROBINSON MP

1. I met Peter Robinson today. The following are the main points from our conversation.

Prospects of Talks

2. He said that he saw no real prospects for Talks on substance before the General Election. He said that none of the party leaders - and he also extended this to the majority in the parties - wanted to engage in substantial Talks before then. I asked him if that included his leader. He said yes. He had not spoken to Dr Paisley for some weeks but he could read the signs and Sammy Wilson, who had had a conversation with Paisley about 10 days ago, reported to Robinson that Paisley had said that he was glad they had "escaped" from the last Talks and that he did not want to re-engage in new inter-party Talks on substantial business before the Election.

3. I asked Robinson why, apart from the uncertainty of the timing of the Election, this should be the case. Robinson said that any soundings which Paisley had taken since the Talks ended convinced him that he was taking too great a political risk in engaging in 3 stranded inter-party - inter-Governmental Talks. Robinson said that Paisley was now convinced that he had taken too great a risk in agreeing to Charlie Haughey or any other Irish Minister coming to Belfast for Strand 2 and Robinson's view is that Paisley is now

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convinced that he could not sell that idea to his supporters. Robinson was not sure if Paisley's concern on this would be lessened after a General Election but it would not be lessened before one.

4. Although not convinced that Talks would start Robinson still thought that the biggest procedural issue to be addressed, before any new Talks could take place, was the length of any gap. This somewhat ignores what he had just said on Strand 2 venue. He said that Unionists would need a longer (unspecified) gap and a provision for "injury time". He repeated that Unionists would not accept that the Irish Government could pull the shutters down, without regard to progress, just because an IGC had been scheduled beforehand. I asked him if it was vital to Unionists that "injury time" (or some similar mechanism to lengthen the gap depending on progress) be spelled out beforehand. He answered emphatically "yes".

5. He was, he said, very depressed about the political scene and he intended to make a major speech at his Party Conference at the end of November indicating his thoughts on the future. I asked him what he had in mind - he declined in direct terms to tell me (but see below); I also asked if he was assuming that there would be no significant political developments by then - he said he was assuming that.

Independence for NI

6. We then went on to talk about his thoughts on the longer term future for NI. He said that increasingly people in the Protestant community were focussing on independence. He said that he did not advocate that, though I was not entirely convinced, but that if any serious and credible politician were to so advocate then the independence movement would develop very quickly. He did not see it as a solution to the violence he said; he thought that there would be a major explosion of violence. However he went on to say that he thought that all British Governments (and any potential Governments) had made it clear that the union was finished and that most Protestants to whom he spoke knew that though they were not clear on what they should do about that. The only clear alternative which they could see was independence.

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Period between now and General Election

7. I asked him what should happen if substantive talks were not a practical proposition before an Election. He said that we should make that clear fairly soon but invite party delegations to continue to meet - bilaterally at least at first - to settle procedures and structures for new Talks after the Election. He did not favour this happening at Westminster. He said that that would suit Molyneaux because he was outnumbered in his Talks delegation but when MPs were included, as they would be in Westminster, he could get his way. He went on to say that, in his view, Molyneaux would agree to Talks on procedure, outside Westminster, if it had been made clear beforehand that these were not aimed at having substantive Talks begin before the Election. If the latter were not the case Molyneaux would insist on Westminster and would continue to delay and prevaricate in case he was bounced into substantive Talks.

Contacts between parties

8. He told me that there had been no contacts between parties since the Talks ended. He still blamed the SDLP for not wanting to talk substance; also he said that the UUP and DUP as parties had no joint strategy not even during the Talks. He said that the only times when the UUP and DUP delegations met together at the Talks were for debriefing after leaders' or small delegation's meetings with the Secretary of State. They had not met jointly as delegations to consider strategy or tactics. He totally discounted the Alliance except as something which John Hume could use, when it suited him, to even up the numbers.

Protestant paramilitary violence

9. Robinson saw the recent increase in Protestant paramilitary violence as due to Protestants' frustration at the fact that politically they can achieve little. The AIA is still in place; their elected politicians can't effect change; HMG is selling out the union. He said that he was now hearing justification for these killings from normally moralistic people. He saw no early let up in the increase in this type of killing.

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Comment

10. Peter Robinson is obviously frustrated at what he sees as the lack of political progress. His views on independence were clearly well thought out and, though presented as just reporting what he sees, the impression he meant to convey was that he saw that or something like it as the way forward in the absence of progress on any other acceptable front. That may be pressure tactics though it may signal at least a greater emphasis on an approach which is often not far from the surface of some DUP politicians. He clearly would like to make progress on inter-party talks but is enough of a realist to acknowledge that there is little enthusiasm in any of the parties for talks, other than on their terms, at present.

(SIGNED)

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