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Lunch with Paul Arthur, 20 January 1995

Mr McDonagh and I met with Paul Arthur on Friday 20 January. He was in town to promote a major conference he is organising, which is scheduled to take place in Belfast in June, on the back of the Economic Conference in Washington. He joined us for lunch following a successful meeting at the US Embassy that morning.

He is coordinating arrangements for the Conference, along with "two Americans." It is being organised under the umbrella of "The Foundation for a Just Society", funded by George Soros, which he told us, had serious international clout and the ability to attract top level speakers. For example an invitation to former German President, Von Weizacker, to give the opening address is being considered and if this issues, Arthur is confident of a positive response.

The Conference is to be called "Justice in a Time of Transition", a title which had initially worried the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, since he felt it seemed to imply that "British justice did not prevail". However, once Arthur had assured him that the key word was "transition" Mayhew had come round and the NIO were now giving their full support to the conference.

The Americans were also on board and he had had a useful meeting with Nancy Soderberg, set up for him by John Hume, though not helped by the fact that when Soderberg brought up the topic of the Conference with Hume when they next met, the details appeared to have temporarily slipped his mind.

Arthur has also been having meetings with Sinn Fein and Loyalist representatives, some of whom he had not spoken to in twenty years. He had been encouraged by widespread support for the Conference and impressed by the flexibility and openness of those he spoke to, including Martin McGuinness and Joe English.

When he had explained that he was receiving support from all sides except the DUP, English had remarked "well of course they're extremists", a phrase which Arthur felt revealed the gulf that exists between the Loyalists and the DUP and summed up how far someone with a background like English had come.

McGuinness had also been supportive, once he had established from Arthur that the conference would not follow the lines of "Beyond Hate," a conference which had taken a somewhat "spiritual" line on reconciliation. Arthur had agreed with McGuinness that there had been "a lot of garbage" in "Beyond Hate" although McGuinness accepted that the conference had given Sinn Fein a valuable platform at a difficult period when they had otherwise been marginalised.

In contrast, he is determined that his Conference will address more practical issues, what he termed "process issues," rather

than constitutional issues, which he accepted were the remit of the two governments and the political parties. Structurally, the Conference is to be organised into groups which will discuss; policing, decommissioning, memory and dependency culture, including economic dependency.

It is intended to invite speakers from countries in Africa, South America and Eastern Europe who have recently undergone or are undergoing a time of transition, to share their experiences, the mistakes they have made and the lessons they have learned. Again this was something which had concerned the Secretary of State, who had pointed out that direct comparisons could not be made as these examples were not "democracies".

Arthur mentioned that he had been one of a small group of academics invited to dinner with the Secretary of State "and his full team" recently, during which fellow academic Paul Bew had, he said, "taken a position somewhere right of Paisley" and spoken warmly about "the golden age of direct rule from 1976 to 1982." Arthur said that he had been particularly impressed during the dinner by the astute questions asked by Jonathan Stephens.

Arthur referred to tensions between "Joe Handron's people" and John Hume over the possibility of an electoral deal between the SDLP and Sinn Fein. When Arthur had pressed Hume about this, he had replied; "what are we after, peace or seats?" Arthur commented; "but then, he can afford to say that".

He told us that while in London he had been to dinner at the home of Paul and Marigold Johnson. During the evening Marigold had told him that he was sitting in the very chair in which Tony Blair had just recently sat as their dinner guest. Paul Johnston then confided that he had been "particularly impressed with Blair", a remark which, Arthur said, had made him distinctly uneasy!