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Ms Nolan
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Confidential

PST: PSS; Ministers Owen,
 de Rossa & Taylor; Attorney
 General; Minister of State
 Coveney; Messrs. Teahon,
 Donlon & Dalton; Amb.
 London and Washington; Joint
 Secretary; Counsellors A-I.

Multi-Party Talks**Daily Report - 18 November 1996**

1. **In summary:**
 - The Plenary met for half an hour this morning and adjourned until Wednesday morning, (not before midday, and subject to the Chairman's call) in order to facilitate further bilaterals.
 - We met the British Government, the SDLP and the UDP. There was general consensus that the talks may shortly break down over decommissioning unless a way can be found through the present impasse.
 - We made clear that the Government would wish to be convinced that the approach proposed by the British Government last week is a viable exit strategy - rather than a potential trap which effectively involves ratcheting us close to the Washington Three precondition and is also at variance with the Mitchell Report.
2. The Government delegation today was led by Minister Coveney.
3. The Plenary, chaired by PM Holkeri, met at noon for half an hour. It was agreed that it would be helpful to let bilaterals continue and that the Plenary would not meet again before noon on Wednesday. (It seems unlikely it will meet before next week).
4. In this session, McCartney (in the unchallenged role of spokesman for the Unionist side) summed up three points from the papers submitted by the three Unionist parties. First, any ceasefire declared must be complete in nature in permanent in extent. Second, the declaration must be accompanied by the handing-over of a substantial amount of weapons. Third, decommissioning must not be linked to progress in the negotiations.
5. At a bilateral meeting, the Secretary of State explained last week's British Government paper in terms of the UUP's need for political cover in the context of possible Sinn Féin entry into the talks. The paper had not been shown to David Trimble but its ideas had been aired with him (and had drawn a less than enthusiastic response). The Secretary of State underlined how close the talks were to collapse.
6. Minister Coveney recognised this but made clear that we could not go along with an approach which involved a retreat towards Washington Three. Efforts were being made to satisfy Trimble's voracious appetite for political cover at the expense of most other interests in the talks process. The Minister recalled the successive steps agreed to by the two Governments in order to meet Unionists concerns. These had been

entirely unreciprocated.

7. The Secretary of State and Michael Ancram denied any intention to revert to Washington Three. We commented that the British proposal was either an exit strategy or a trap. If they could persuade us that it offered the former, and did not simply involve further ratcheting back to Washington Three, our Government would be willing to look at this. If, however, we were being asked simply to "try this out", without any guarantee that it would secure the transition to meaningful three-stranded negotiations and a realistic approach to decommissioning, this would effectively mean that the talks were going to break down over the decommissioning issue. If so there was little point in going to elaborate lengths merely to come up with the same outcome at a slightly later stage.
8. In response, the British emphasised the non-mandatory nature of the judgement which they were proposing for the Commission and also the value of the envisaged liaison committee as a means of ensuring political input to this judgement. They indicated that Trimble had been unenthusiastic about vesting in the Commission anything approximating to a decision on the timing of decommissioning.
9. The meeting ended inconclusively. The discussion will be resumed at the Conference meeting scheduled for Wednesday evening.
10. The SDLP indicated some annoyance to us over the UUP's preparation and subsequent circulation of a paper (which effectively aligns them with the DUP and UKUP positions on decommissioning) at the very time when the SDLP and the UUP were supposedly engaged in bilateral efforts to find a joint solution to the impasse. They were, in consequence, reserved on the Alliance proposal for a trilateral meeting between the SDLP, the UUP and Alliance.
11. The UDP expressed considerable gloom about the prospects for the process and the consequences of a collapse for their own situation on the ground. They showed disappointment with the position reflected in the UUP paper, and asked the two Governments to intercede with the SDLP and the UUP to find an agreed way forward.
12. They expressed extreme unease at the prospect of setting up the verification commission "upfront" and indicated they may now become more overtly critical of the Unionist Parties' position (Ervine seems to be thinking along the same lines).
13. We were told today that General De Chastelain planned to discuss with the two Governments some ideas arising from contacts which he had with "the parties" last week, but is persuaded of the wisdom of clearing this with Senator Mitchell first.
14. The SDLP briefed us on bilaterals they had with the UUP and Alliance this afternoon.
15. The UUP delegation had included Trimble and Maginnis, who seemed to have no knowledge of earlier UUP/SDLP discussion, and denied there had been any bad faith in publishing a paper on decommissioning which bore no relationship whatever to that

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discussion. It was unclear to the SDLP whether they were signalling there was any latitude in terms of their stated position, so a further meeting has been scheduled for tomorrow. (They mentioned the forthcoming DUP Conference as an inhibiting factor for discussions next week).

16. Alliance seemed in despair and conceded that the current UUP seemed to vindicate the pessimistic analysis on Unionist intentions which the SDLP had proffered to the Alliance Party proposal last week. They will have a trilateral with Alliance and the UUP tomorrow, but without any great expectations.

David Donoghue
18 November 1996