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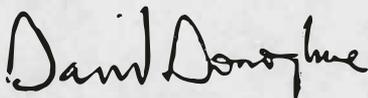
Confidential**Multi-Party Talks****23 March 1998**

1. Today's proceedings at Castle Buildings consisted of a presentation by the Secretary of State for Wales on plans for the Welsh Assembly and a two-hour Strand One session.
2. Sinn Féin's return to the talks was marked by a mild DUP protest at the entrance gates. They and all other parties were represented today at party leader level. We understand that the atmosphere between the UUP and Sinn Féin was somewhat warmer than expected, with John Taylor referring in relaxed fashion to the Sinn Féin leader as "Gerry" during the session on the Welsh Assembly.
3. The main value of the latter session, Paul Murphy told us, was that it highlighted in the Welsh model a possible compromise between the SDLP and UUP versions of how the NI Assembly might work.
4. This afternoon's Strand One meeting addressed the synthesis paper which was tabled by the British Government a fortnight ago. According to the SDLP, there was little change in the well-known positions of the parties. Martin McGuinness caused some exasperation by repeating his well-worn complaint about the lack of direct UUP engagement with Sinn Féin.
5. While there was no general break-up into bilateral sessions following this meeting (as originally envisaged), the SDLP met bilaterally with both Sinn Féin and the UUP. The meeting with Sinn Féin was largely devoted to updating them on developments in their absence.
6. John Hume described the meeting with the UUP, led by Trimble and Taylor, as very positive. There was a detailed discussion on Strand Two in which the SDLP made a strong case for a powerful secretariat which would not only have the right to put forward proposals but would also monitor the implementation of joint actions. Trimble was non-committal on this point.
7. The parties have agreed to meet again on Wednesday morning for a drafting session (three per side) on Strand Two matters. It was agreed that any text which emerges will be passed on to the two Governments, rather than tabled as a separate initiative. Hume undertook to work with the UUP to find alternatives to sensitive terms such as "executive". Hume has sought our help in this and has asked that the Government delegation should meet the SDLP drafting team tomorrow to help prepare them for Wednesday's meeting.

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8. David Cooney and I had a discussion with the Secretary of State about the handling of tomorrow's proceedings and other matters. The Secretary of State fears that the UUP may attempt to exploit a brief Plenary planned for tomorrow morning (to enable Sinn Féin to recommit themselves to the Mitchell Principles) for the purpose of seeking Sinn Féin's expulsion over recent activities by Republican paramilitaries. In conversation with us, she recognised that neither the recent Conway killing nor the Armagh mortar attack would justify renewed expulsion. In the latter respect, she has yet to hear officially from the Chief Constable but agreed with our hypothesis that, even if the weapons used were traceable to the IRA, it was highly unlikely that the operation had been authorised by the Army Council. She hopes that, if it is necessary to institute a Rule 29 procedure tomorrow, the Plenary provided for under this could be delayed until tomorrow evening or later.
9. David Trimble has written to Senator Mitchell (whom he is to see this evening) to request a review Plenary, as he has been signalling over the weekend. The Senator's inclination is to proceed with Strand Two tomorrow morning (following a brief initial Plenary for Sinn Féin's reaffirmation) and to schedule the review Plenary for tomorrow afternoon. Gerry Adams, with whom we spoke this afternoon, is relaxed on this subject but hopes that the Chairman will provide for a time-limited session (of perhaps three hours).
10. We also worked with British officials today on a short joint paper listing key outstanding issues for discussion which might be circulated at, or before, the review Plenary (partly with a view to diluting the heavy focus on decommissioning which can be expected from the UUP).



David Donoghue
23 March 1998