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cc See Attached

PS/Secretary of State (B&L)

WEEKLY INFORMATION BULLETIN - 15-21 DECEMBER 1997

Prospects for the Week

The disorder and damage following the Apprentice Boys' march in Londonderry on Saturday will continue to dominate the headlines at least in the early part of the week. It will put a renewed emphasis on the second reading of the Parades Bill in the House of Commons on Thursday. As an added complication news may break towards the end of the week of the resignation of Rev Roy Magee from the Parades Commission.

Reaction to the visit of Sinn Fein to No 10 and the impact of the escape from the Maze may also continue to echo through political and media circles.

At the Talks the Review plenary resumes on Monday. The Chairman will brief participants on the progress of the special steering group over the past two weeks. In spite of the lack of complete agreement so far on the Key Issues paper an encouraging level of engagement has taken place. Talks will adjourn by Wednesday, until 12 January.

The week will also be a crucial one in determining if Ulster framers follow the example of their mainland counterparts in mounting street protests following the decision by the EU Commission on intervention. They are claiming beef producers here cannot find an outlet for their stock.

Tuesday will see the spotlight turn on Brussels where the Standing Veterinary Council will be asked to ratify a scheme which would lift the beef ban here. If the scheme is not accepted the export ban will continue and political pressure on the Government is bound to increase.

The Government is also under pressure to find more money to support the industry following last week's meeting with the Secretary of State and Lord Dubs and a meeting this week between MEPs and the Prime Minister. Farmers continue to remind the Government that they were promised help in days rather than weeks.

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On Monday the Police Bill has its Second Reading in the House of Commons while on the same day the Armed Forces Minister plans to visit Northern Ireland. His programme of visits to troops will include a media facility.

A Ministerial response has issued to Alex Maskey confirming that the RUC must be involved in implementing measures under the key Persons Protection Scheme. Sinn Fein are unlikely to accept this quietly and may try legal action.

There will be a visit to Down District Council on Friday.

The monthly unemployment figures are due for release on Wednesday and will show a slight decrease.

An announcement may be made during the week by the ROI power company ESB that it is to purchase 15% in Coolkeeragh power station and this could attract comment. The announcement of an IDB-backed investment by Boxmore Healthcare which involves their relocation away from West Belfast is likely to cause criticism.

Opportunities this week

The visit of the Armed Forces Minister on Monday will raise the subject of troop levels and their deployment. It is understood the Minister intends to take the opportunity to outline the MoD's flexible response to the ceasefire.

Christmas adjournment of Talks may offer doorstep/conference and other opportunities to sign off on a positive note. Consideration is being given to a newspaper article in the name of a Minister and to weekend media opportunities.

KEY THEMES

Political

The Government's stated intention is to ensure that the vital principles of democracy underpin developments towards a long-term political settlement. Lasting stability must grow out of a broad consensus and the clearly articulated desire for disparate groupings to work together in the common interest. Consent has always been, and remains, the key issue in any proposals for change.

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The views of political leaders and their constituents are welcomed by the Government, which is committed to a more open and accountable approach. New institutions can and will be developed only in ways which take full account of the interests and aspirations of both communities.

The British and Irish governments agree that the way forward must be on the basis of implementing all aspects of the Mitchell report. These proposals offer a fair and balanced approach.

Talks

For the Government's part, we are working hard to see the talks process move forward; we have provided the opportunity for inclusive talks, we have got the real issues on the table for discussion.

Progress has been slow. But the new streamlined format is helping to move things forward and it is still early days - it's only two months since the substantive negotiations began. The key step is to have the parties engaged. The Government would like to see real progress before Christmas, as the Prime Minister said.

The process was never going to be easy - it is not surprising that it is taking time for the parties to get into detailed discussions on sensitive issues. There are real difficulties to be grappled with.

The success of this process depends on the parties reaching agreement amongst themselves. We will do all we can to facilitate that process but, at the end of the day, it is only the parties which have the power to achieve agreement.

Sinn Fein visit to No 10

The Government has made it clear, following the entry of Sinn Fein to the talks process that they will be treated the same as other political parties.

In the same way that he meets other parties the Prime Minister met Sinn Fein on Thursday.

Parallel talks involving the Prime Minister

There is nothing unusual in the fact that meetings are happening at No 10 as well as Castle Buildings. The Prime Minister's engagement reflects his commitment to the political process and the priority that the Government gives to it.

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We welcome the similar engagement by the Taoiseach with a number of the key players.

Decommissioning

The two Governments welcome the Independent Commission's initial. The report offers a roadmap on how decommissioning might be handled in due course.

Why no decommissioning schemes - the Commission has, with admirable speed, produced initial proposals. These will be discussed and refined into schemes.

Consent

Both Governments remain fundamentally committed to the principle of consent in all its aspects, as set out both in United Kingdom law in section 1 of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act and in the Downing Street Declaration.

This means that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom will not change without the consent of a majority of its people. Moreover, we are committed to putting any agreed outcome to the negotiations to the people of Northern Ireland for approval in a referendum.

As far as the political negotiations are concerned the guarantees are even stronger. This is because of the "Triple Lock" which requires the consent of the parties, Parliament and the people of Northern Ireland themselves.

DUP/UKUP

While we believe that the process would be strengthened by their participation, we have continuing links with them which enable us to hear their views on current issues.

Sinn Fein

A commitment to non-violence and democracy is the only basis for the negotiations and Mr Blair will emphasise this again in his meeting. We are in no doubt that Sinn Fein and the IRA are inextricably linked. If Sinn Fein dishonour their commitment to the Mitchell principles, whether through their own actions or a return to IRA violence, they will be out of the negotiations. Gerry Adams has signed Sinn Fein up to the Mitchell principles, so they are committed to:

- exclusively peaceful means;
- total disarmament of all paramilitaries;
- renounce force and oppose its use by others (eg IRA); and

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- accept any agreement in the negotiations.

We shall hold Sinn Fein to these commitments. The Mitchell principles commit Sinn Fein to the total disarmament of all paramilitaries. As Mitchell said, there has to be a compromise. We support his compromise of decommissioning during negotiations. Mr Adams said he would approach these negotiations on the basis of 'compromise, compromise, compromise'. He, like everyone else, must deliver.

Parades Bill

Tackling the parades issue could make an enormous contribution to the search for a lasting settlement which is being pursued in the Talks process.

We are convinced the way forward is a policy based both on rights, and on the responsibilities which go with them. Rights - the right to free assembly, which includes the right to march and the right to protest against marches, peacefully and within the law. Responsibilities - in a democratic society we all have the responsibility to express our rights in a way which respects the rights and freedom of others.

The importance of achieving a local accommodation is stressed throughout the North Report. No decision making process can match an amicable agreement on the ground.

Security

We condemn without reservation any use of violence in whatever form.

While there remains any threat from terrorist groups it is incumbent on the Government to ensure that adequate measures are in place to safeguard the public.

The police and army have made a number of changes to the security profile following the ceasefire, including reductions in security force patrols and military support to the RUC.

However our approach to security will be examined in the light of recent events and we will act accordingly. We will not move more quickly than events on the ground allow. Any steps already taken can be quickly reversed if necessary.

Policy on policing is currently under review and new measures have been announced. The Police Reform Bill has now been published.

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Weekend events in Londonderry

The events in Londonderry at the weekend are both disappointing and regrettable. It is very sad to see the sheer waste which occurred and the damage which has been done, including to the much improved image of the City and efforts to build a prosperous future..

There is no excuse or justification for wanton violence and destruction of this kind; it achieves nothing and is to be utterly condemned.

The Government will continue to do everything in its power to resolve the problems which led to these events. The proposals in the Parades Bill currently before Parliament, address these issues.

These events reinforce very clearly the need for the long-term democratic settlement in Northern Ireland which the Government is working towards.

De-escalatory Measures

Since the IRA ceasefire, Army patrolling in support of the RUC has reduced to less than half the pre-ceasefire level.

Many road barriers have been re-opened. Internment powers are being removed and all exclusion orders have been lifted. An Army battalion has been relocated from Northern Ireland to its home base in GB. This move, which has been taken solely for operational reasons, reflects the improved security situation and is a further step towards the normality we all crave. In addition there will no longer be army accompaniment of police patrols in Belfast.

South Armagh Towers

As with all aspects of security the continuing requirement for observation posts in South Armagh is regularly reviewed against the prevailing threat.

A number of groups have not declared a ceasefire and the threat from these groups remains.

Security Force Presence in West Belfast

Since the PIRA ceasefire on 20 July there has been a considerable reduction in the number and frequency of military patrols in West Belfast. There are far fewer soldiers on the streets than previously.

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Because of the reduction in Army patrolling, the GOC and the Chief Constable have been able to reduce the number of soldiers deployed for duty in Belfast by relocating one battalion.

The RUC will continue to carry out their duties in West Belfast as they do in every other part of Northern Ireland.

Emergency Provisions Bill

The Government wishes to be able eventually to repeal this legislation. However, that is not possible at present.

Some terrorist groups, on both sides, remain active and we will not leave the security forces nor the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland without the means they need to counter those activities.

The Home Secretary has announced the government's intention to present new proposals to replace both the EPA and the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) with permanent UK-wide counter-terrorism legislation. These will be published in a joint Home Office / Northern Ireland Office consultation paper early in the new year.

In the interim, and in advance of any fundamental reform of the counter terrorism legislation, a renewed and amended Emergency Provisions Act will continue to provide the people of Northern Ireland with vital protections against the terrorist threat.

Splits within the IRA and Sinn Fein

Our security advice is that the IRA ceasefire continues to be stable. This is the key point for the talks process and Sinn Fein's participation in that process.

Personal Protection for Sinn Fein

Under a limited non-statutory scheme operated by the NIO, security measures may be provided for individuals whose death or injury from terrorist attack could damage or seriously undermine:

- the democratic framework of Government in Northern Ireland;
- the effective administration of Government or the criminal justice system; or
- the maintenance of law and order

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We are not prepared to discuss individual cases which are of a confidential nature, nor the range of security measures available.

Measures required must be professionally assessed, to provide reasonable protection against the particular types of threat in each case and the RUC are best placed to make this assessment.

The scheme installs domestic protection measures at public expense, it does not provide grants to the individual; there are cost limits to what can be provided; what is available in any individual case is a matter for the Government; and no system is provided/installed without the individual concerned being content. We are not in the business of forcing protection down people's throats.

Recognition of Victims of Violence

A Commission has been set up to look at possible ways to recognise the pain and suffering felt by victims of violence arising from the troubles of the last 30 years, including those who have died or been injured in the service of the community.

The Prime Minister has said that from his discussions and meetings with people across Northern Ireland, he felt that not enough attention had been paid to those who had suffered.

The Commissioner, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield is undertaking a consultation exercise through Northern Ireland and beyond.

He will have particular regard to the possibility of establishing a new memorial reflecting both the sorrows of the past and hope for a stable and peaceful future.

Bloody Sunday

The new material which has been submitted to the Secretary of State is being considered and Government hopes to make an announcement as soon as possible. (We haven't at any stage put a timescale on this.)

Prisoner Transfers

The Government attaches considerable importance to enabling prisoners to maintain family ties while serving their sentences. As part of a number of measures to facilitate family contact there is provision for prisoners to transfer to another United Kingdom jurisdiction, or to one of the Islands, where they have close family members.

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Minor changes have been made to the transfer policy.

Previously the policy required only that there was good reason to believe the prisoner intended to reside in the receiving jurisdiction following release.

The Christmas Home Leave scheme is giving many more prisoners the opportunity to spend time at home with families. This year, over 400 prisoners have had their applications approved, about one third of all sentenced prisoners.

Beef Industry Problems

Although, of course, the beef ban is an issue over which we in Northern Ireland do not exercise sovereign authority, the Secretary of State and Lord Dubs are acutely aware of, and sympathetic to, the special problems faced by Northern Irish beef farmers.

UK officials are in detailed negotiations with the EC in the effort to have the ban lifted, and they will be considering the Certified Herd Scheme again on December 16 at the Standing Veterinary Committee in Brussels.

The Government would deplore any illegal action by farmers. Although understanding of their frustrations, such action serves only to apply more pressure on producers and finishers. The Government is applying all possible pressure where it is really needed - that is in the EC, towards a lifting of the ban and the re-introduction of intervention support.

Lord Dubs and DANI officials have been in constant contact with the industry and unions. The SOS has met the industry to discuss the situation, and the Prime Minister met the Northern Ireland MPs in the House of Commons this week.

Rights and Confidence Building

This Government is committed to the fundamental principles of fairness and justice; there will be no second-class citizens. We are determined to see full respect for, and equality of, civil, political, social and cultural rights and freedom from discrimination for everyone. We are committed to building a society where the different identities are treated equally and enjoy mutual respect.

We will seek wherever possible initiatives to build confidence throughout the community and have announced a programme of specific measures including:- combating discrimination

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in labour market and implementation of North Report. The Government has now published a White Paper on the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into UK Law and we have not ruled out that further provisions in addition to the incorporation of the Convention might be appropriate for the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland. We will also seek to increase confidence in the RUC through reform of structures and the complaints system

These measures will threaten no-one and reflect sound principles which should underpin any fair minded society.

It is important that confidence-building is seen as something which is of importance to both the main communities in Northern Ireland. It would be wrong to think of it in terms of a 'shopping list' put forward by one community to the exclusion of the other. This Government wants to win the trust and confidence of both communities in Northern Ireland by clearly being seen to be fair and even-handed to everyone.

(Signed)

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CONFIDENTIAL
10

12