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FROM: D BROOKER
CPL DIVISION
30 JANUARY 1995

cc: PS/Sir John Wheeler (L,B&DFP) -B
PS/Michael Ancram (L,B&DENI) -B
PS/Baroness Denton (L,DANI&DED) -B
PS/Mr Moss (L,DOE&DHSS) -B
PS/PUS (L&B) -B
PS/Mr Fell -B
Mr Thomas -B
Mr Legge -B
NI Perm Secs -B
Mr Bell -B
Mr Watkins -B
Mr Williams -B
Mr Leach -B
Mr Wood (L&B) -B
Mr Stephens -B
Mrs Devlin, Cent Sec -B
Mr Maxwell -B
Mr Maccabe -B
Mr Dodds -B
HMA Dublin -B
Mr Lamont -B

PS/Secretary of State (L&B) -B

ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT: SINN FEIN, THE PUP AND UDP

This note considers whether the time has now arrived when it would be right for Ministers to make further relaxations in our policy on contacts with Sinn Fein, the PUP and UDP. It recommends that senior officials should be authorised to meet Sinn Fein, and the two loyalist parties, in their own right, to discuss economic and social (though not security or political) matters.

Background

2. Since the ceasefires were announced we have envisaged the three parties working their way towards a normal relationship with Government through a series of incremental steps, depending on Ministers' judgement as to their continuing commitment to democratic methods. One of the main barometers of this commitment is their

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determination to engage in, and make progress in, exploratory dialogue.

3. In brief, we have envisaged five theoretical stages through which the three parties might pass on their way to a normal working relationship with Government. These are -

- Senior officials to meet the three parties in their own right to discuss economic and social issues
- As above, but also extending to security and political issues
- Junior Ministers to join XD and LXD, but solely for the purpose of bringing specific political direction to those discussions, not as a sign that the parties were being accepted fully into the political fold. (That would still be dependent upon continuing progress in exploratory dialogue)
- Junior Ministers to engage in discussions with Sinn Fein in their own right, on issues relevant to Government policy - whether economic, social, political or relevant to security
- The three parties to have direct access, in their own right, to the Secretary of State, to discuss any issue of Government policy. For all practical purposes, the first meeting with the Secretary of State would represent the parties' formal induction into the normal political life of the Province. (We already have it in mind that the Secretary of State may find himself on the same platform as Gerry Adams at the US Investment Conference in May and that a meeting before then, on our own terms, could be desirable).

4. The idea behind our drawing up the above sequence of stages was so that we could visualise how the three parties might be brought,

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progressively, into a normal relationship with Government under conditions of our own choosing. Whether, in practice, it turns out to be realistic to stick rigidly to this sequence remains to be seen; it nevertheless provides a useful guide to how we might approach our affairs with Sinn Fein over the coming weeks.

Recent Developments

5. Since the ceasefires were declared Ministers have agreed to certain changes at the margins of our policy, in order to show recognition of the parties' decision to move away from violence. Thus the NI Departments have been advised that, when Sinn Fein representatives write to them they can be sent a fuller reply, on the same lines as the other parties, rather than the terse form of acknowledgement which has been the practice hitherto. More significantly, following the decision to invite Sinn Fein to the Prime Minister's Investment Conference in December, Ministers have also decided that from now on they will not reject requests for meetings from Council delegations solely because they include representatives of Sinn Fein, the PUP or UDP.

6. Ministers have also taken a softer line on limited contacts with Sinn Fein during outside visits. Thus, the Secretary of State had a brief exchange with Sinn Fein Councillors in Strabane and, more recently, Mr Moss attended a closed meeting of Derry City Council on 18 January, when five Sinn Fein councillors were present. (Already speaking like an experienced political hand, Mitchell McLaughlin described the meeting as "disappointing" in terms of indications of progress on local issues). Mr Moss has also opened the Dunlewey Centre in Belfast, to which Gerry Adams was invited. The Minister declined Mr Adams' attempts at a handshake.

8. This softer approach has also been carried through at official level. The Ambassador has attended two sessions of the Forum at which Sinn Fein have been present; (Mr Daniell attended one of these also). Sinn Fein councillors from Newry and Mourne and Down District Councils were also invited to the low key launch, on

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27 January, of the South Armagh Area Strategy under the Rural Development Programme, at which DANI were represented at Grade 3 level. Mr Spence is also Co-Chairman of the Derry City Partnership, on which Sinn Fein are represented by Mitchell McLaughlin.

(Mr Spence is now proposing to move towards the creation of a Belfast City Partnership Board which, again, will include Sinn Fein - his minute and Mr Fell's minute of 20 and 24 January respectively refer).

9. In short, even though Ministers have reserved their position on meeting Sinn Fein (and the loyalists) in their own right, the general drift has been towards a more open approach to contacts with Sinn Fein; in recent weeks this has been recognised and understood in the Northern Ireland community. It has created little adverse reaction. It is apparent that the decision to open exploratory dialogue has set a new threshold of expectation in the community and there was little discernible criticism when, for example, Mr Moss met Sinn Fein in Derry a fortnight ago. Even the Unionist press was muted in its response, a Belfast Telegraph editorial describing the meeting as "a perfectly natural progression".

Should we now go further?

10. There are fairly solid arguments for Ministers moving things on a stage further, and agreeing - in line with the sequence set out in paragraph 3 - that senior officials should now be authorised to meet the three parties, in their own right, on economic and social issues. To the outside world this would be seen as another natural progression resulting from the substantial engagement in exploratory dialogue; it should provide further encouragement for Sinn Fein that we are prepared to recognise their electoral mandate and, to some extent, reduce the type of criticism that they have aimed at the Prime Minister's Investment Conference and last Monday's meeting with the Lord Mayors at Number 10. This might be seen as a genuine sign of progress by Sinn Fein because Martin O Mullieoir has been pressing Ministers for the best part of a year to allow meetings with Sinn Fein at Ministerial or official level to discuss economic

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regeneration in West Belfast and associated issues. O Mullieoir wrote again to the Secretary of State, Michael Ancram and Baroness Denton on 15 January, see paragraph 14 below.

Timing

11. The timing of any announcement would, of course, have to be carefully considered, especially given the current sensitivities in the Unionist community about the JFD and possible concessions to the Nationalist community. If an announcement were made in the next week or so, however, this would fit neatly with the recommendation in Mr Stephens' minute of 23 January that the Loyalist (and Sinn Fein) should be offered a meeting, in exploratory dialogue, to discuss the JFD once it is published. These latter meetings could, if appropriate, be developed into substantive discussions on the Document as a separate process from exploratory dialogue; meetings with officials to discuss economic and social issues would be a useful interim step in that direction.

12. Officials have considered whether, as one option, an announcement might be made this Wednesday, in parallel with the fourth meeting of exploratory dialogue with Sinn Fein. To make a direct linkage between the announcement and a meeting of XD, however, might be seen as too much of a concession to Sinn Fein, who, many would say, have not yet done enough to justify this degree of recognition. There might be a stronger case for associating an announcement with Loyalist exploratory dialogue, the fifth meeting of which takes place next Monday 5 February, both because the Loyalists seem to be showing a greater commitment to, and flexibility in exploratory dialogue, and because economic and social matters will be the main item on the agenda.

13. If Ministers agree, I would recommend that we aim for a low key announcement on Friday, after XD but in the run-up to LXD. This would allow some association with the meeting of LXD on Monday but without being seen specifically to reward the Loyalists. They have not, in fact, made a big issue out of meetings with Ministers or

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officials on social and economic issues and so there is no compelling reason for offering a concession directly to them as such; if an announcement were made on Friday, however, they could indirectly pick up some of the benefits on Monday.

Presentation

14. We have three letters outstanding from Martin O Muilleoir at present. He wrote separately to the Secretary of State, Michael Ancram and Baroness Denton on 15 January to say that in the light of the Government's decision to lift the ban on Ministerial contact with Sinn Fein - which was, of course, a misunderstanding of the decision to agree to meetings with cross-party council delegations - he was now resurrecting requests for meetings to discuss, respectively -

- The Government ban on funding of Sinn Fein (ie Conway Street Mill/the Hurd Policy),
- The Government's attitude to Irish medium education and, in particular, Meanscoil Feirste,
- Economic reconstruction in Belfast, including the Springvale project and "the peace dividend".

15. Were Ministers to agree that senior officials could now meet Sinn Fein, the PUP and UDP to discuss social and economic issues, we would provide a single response, to issue from the Secretary of State's Office, advising Mr O Muilleoir that a series of meetings could now take place. We would use the draft to set out the Government's policy in some detail, so as to remove any misunderstandings; we might also release it to the press to make sure that our policy was widely understood. In line with the recommendation in paragraph 13 it might issue this Thursday. We need feel no compunction about releasing the text, since Mr O Muilleoir has frequently advertised his various bids for meetings with Ministers. The only one of his bids which we would refuse is the one relating to the ban on funding - ie the Hurd

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olicy. That policy is under review and termination is an option being considered, but it would be premature to offer a meeting now.

Recommendation

16. Ministers are invited to agree the policy proposal in paragraph 10, and the proposals for handling in paragraphs 13 and 15.

17. If these are agreed, Ministers may wish to note that the Embassy in Dublin have advised that they would need to follow a more flexible (but lower profile) approach for the special situation in Dublin. Senior staff are increasingly likely to encounter Sinn Fein figures at social and other events. They will naturally not go out of their way to cultivate them, and continue to exercise discretion about public contacts. But they could now with advantage engage them in private conversation if appropriate when they meet. They could gain insight into Sinn Fein thinking and reinforce the lines we are taking in XD, on all issues. There should be no need to insist on special restrictions such as separate seating arrangements for lunches at the Forum.

signed DB

D BROOKER
OAB Ext 6591

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