

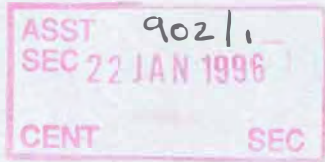
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*Pelle*  
*Nic1*  
*Dobson*



FROM: PUS  
18 JANUARY 1996

- 1. Mr. [unclear]
- 2. Mr. [unclear] 40301
- 3. Mr. [unclear]
- 4. 824/Sir

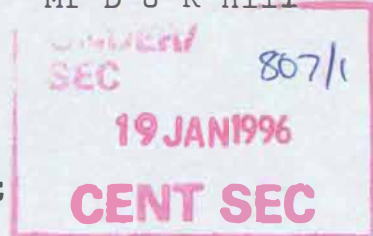


cc: PS/Sir David Fell  
Mr Legge  
Mr Leach  
Mr D J R Hill



- B  
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MR THOMAS - B



*cc Mrs [unclear]*  
*[unclear]*

OFFICIAL OPPOSITION BRIEFING

Sir David Fell and I had a further meeting with Dr Mowlam and her Shadow Northern Ireland team yesterday evening, 17 January. Messrs Tony Worthington, Eric Ilsley and Jim Dowd were present from the Commons and Gareth Williams from the Lords, together with their Political Adviser, Nigel Warner.

2. I will not attempt to summarise a long evening of discussion, principally on the political prospects in Northern Ireland in the light of the impending International Body's report.

3. I did, as per the Secretary of State's instructions, give Dr Mowlam and her colleagues a general brief on where matters had got to and how events might unfold over the coming days. The Shadow Opposition team are already remarkably well informed, including those who have newly joined it, especially Jim Dowd. I foresee much less difficulty in the event of a change of Government on the political side of the office in managing the transition and initial briefing than might have been the case at the last two general elections.

4. We touched on a range of other issues, but the main conclusion regarding preparations we can properly put in hand now or nearer to a general election was as follows.

5. Dr Mowlam and her colleagues agreed that to arrive cold to face massive stacks of written briefs and the simultaneous need to get on with a frenetic programme under intense media and other scrutiny was less than perfect. She (and perhaps some of her colleagues) will be taking part in the Opposition's more general preparations in the event of their winning office (at Templeton College seminars etc). On Northern Ireland specifically, however, the following suggestions emerged in discussion for further consideration:

- (1) the possibility of perhaps two days of briefings and discussions shortly before the election (assuming Ministers agreed) with a morning of short briefing and presentation on the structure of Government in Northern Ireland, and the key issues, to be followed by an afternoon of discussion. A

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second day might start with resources, particularly financial resources, (though I think we should add human resources), the main features of the various annual cycles, and the scope for intervention immediately after the general election or later before the commencement of a complete fresh public expenditure and budgetary round;

- (2) what would be particularly helpful to the Opposition team by way of preparation in the event of their taking office would be a summary listing of key work in progress together with telegraphic indications of those where intervention was practicable/possible/desirable against the broader background of a new government's approach together with indications of how new Ministers could in practice go about it.

6. I said that while within the framework of Northern Ireland government policy and the Northern Ireland Block Ministers had a good deal of autonomy vis-a-vis the general collective policies and decisions of the Government of the day, it would be particularly important to identify those issues where new Northern Ireland Ministers might want to act early which would require the assent of or consultation with colleagues, eg legislative time, financial resources or departures from the general policy of a new government. Incidentally, a tangential discussion at this point revealed considerable lack of depth of knowledge regarding the legislative process and the respective categories of legislation and legislative mechanisms. That may deserve particular attention in any preparatory briefing etc.

7. Before any preparatory work is undertaken, Sir David Fell and I will await a further discussion with Dr Mowlam and her colleagues and I would not in any case want to ask Ministers to authorise us to undertake the kind of presentations and other briefing which were discussed last night until very much nearer the time of a general election - in order to minimise any risk or anxiety that such information could be used to political advantage before the election date.

Signed

JOHN CHILCOT

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