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Mr McGinness 237/96



FROM: T WATSON
Constitutional & Political Division
9 February 1999

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cc see distribution below

Mr Smyth:

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

Grateful if you would deal direct, and urgently, with X at para 3, about which we spoke following a separate conversation which I had with

**SECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETING WITH THE NI WOMEN'S COALITION!
8 FEBRUARY**

The Secretary of State began her series of meetings with the three smaller parties to discuss the current political situation by seeing representatives of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition for an hour yesterday beginning at 14.20. The Coalition was represented by Professor Monica McWilliams, Jane Morrice, Kate Ferron and Judith Cross. Mr Jeffrey and I were also present.

PUS yesterday.

1/2

cc Mrs Deakin

cc Mrs Dwyer

Mrs McAuley

1/2

Summary

A fairly uneventful session with the Coalition expressing its strong support for the Agreement and to doing what it can with both parties to overcome the impasse. Nothing particularly new on party positions either although it sensed that Sinn Fein didn't want the process to fall. The party's assessment of the UUP was less clear.

Jacqueline

Detail

2. The Secretary of State began by working her way through the list of points contained in Mr Jeffrey's note of 8 February - namely the Government was still pressing on with preparations for devolution; proposals on North/South bodies would be the subject of consultation with the parties next week; after 15 February and assuming approval of the FM/DFM Report, the next step would be the making of the D'Hondt Standing Order with consultation on this after 15 February before introduction in early March; other aspects of the Agreement were moving ahead, the Human Rights Commission would be established by March; and 10 March was the legislative target rather than a deadline for the transfer of powers. In addition both Governments were working away behind the scenes to achieve a way through the current impasse.

3. The Secretary of State then asked the NIWC for their views of the current political situation. Professor McWilliams viewed little change in the party positions since the previous discussion with the Secretary of State. At times the UUP seemed relaxed; others less so. For the key

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people in the UUP, the Agreement was viewed as being front loaded. They realised that progress and reviewing the RUC was not good news for their constituents but were in agreement that the pain was worth taking now in order to secure the longer term constitutional aspects. Others weren't so sure. As for Sinn Fein, its position was unchanged. Despite the fact that the organisation was appearing to be concerned with regard to the safety of the public when its guns had disappeared, Professor McWilliams queried whether all this hadn't been carefully massaged for future maximum impact. She added that Sinn Fein was awol with anxiety. Anxiety that was generated by the inevitability of having to do something on weapons and retain their members. Breaking off from this line for a second, Professor McWilliams said Sinn Fein's anxiety would be compounded by the appearance of union flags flying from Parliament Buildings to commemorate the death of King Hussein of Jordan. (This prompted the Secretary of State to seek updated information on the arrangements for the Queen's Birthday salute and any other gun salutes scheduled for the front of Parliament Buildings in the early part of this year. **(Mr Ferguson to provide urgent advice please)**. 1X

4. Continuing, Professor McWilliams said that despite the above she had a sense that Sinn Fein didn't want the process to fail. She agreed to try to arrange further meeting with them later this week and also took the opportunity to reflect on her last meeting with Martin McGuinness. In this she had made the point that Unionists needed a lifeline because they appeared to be being railroaded by everybody and were wriggling and squirming under the pressure. McGuinness responded by saying that he was always keen to try and give the Unionists something if he could.

5. Professor McWilliams moved on and said that she had been very surprised by the complacent attitudes to the process shown by some on the Dublin side when she had been visiting during the Ulster rugby weekend. There needed to be a greater grip on reality if the process was going to get through the current impasse. She said the NIWC would continue to do pieces of work with the Unionists and Sinn Fein and say things to both which most of the other parties didn't believe they would say.

6. On the current impasse, Professor McWilliams thought any formula solution was now well past its sell by date. It may have worked last August but there were now additional elements which were applying more pressure to each side. Sinn Fein needed to say what, if anything, they could do on weapons to General de Chastelain, the Irish or whoever. If their approach had some meaning then she believed all the other pro-Agreement parties would line up behind them. Furthermore if there was something concrete, then it would be more difficult to view this as an insult.

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7. The Secretary of State moved on to outline the position regarding Equality Commission posts and the recent placing of adverts. Professor McWilliams referred to the Civic Forum saying that work on this had finally been completed the previous Thursday. However no sooner had six parties endorsed the compromise package (including Sinn Fein and the UUP) than the First Minister reneged on a small part of it (nominations from the voluntary sector including NICVA). As a result no one was entirely sure where the whole issue stood, yet there was an urgent need to get the matter resolved so that no obstacles were placed in the way of the Report being available in advance of Monday's Assembly meeting. (The Secretary of State subsequently asked Mr Jeffrey to alert Mr Murphy to all of this and ensure the First Minister was in a position to resolve this difficulty by Thursday).

8. Professor McWilliams went on to raise the draft Assembly Standing Orders and in particular the distinction that appeared to be being made at a meeting last week with regard to the appointment of members to statutory Committees and ad hoc Committees. A proposal for the latter was suggesting that parties with more than 16 members received two seats and parties with less than this received one. The NIWC were concerned about this distinction on two grounds; how this would pan out in terms of broad proportionality and the effect it would have on the resources of the smaller parties with regard to ad hoc Committees and what mechanisms were likely to be used to ensure proportionality in each statutory Committee (as opposed to the proportionality of parties across all statutory Committees). The Secretary of State noted the point with some sympathy and said it would be drawn to the attention of the Standing Orders Committee during its consideration of the present draft.

9. Professor McWilliams then raised the core funding problem surrounding the North Belfast Resource Centre run by Vivian Anderson. Funding was ceasing on 1 March and this was likely to lead to closure shortly afterwards. Such a closure could be particularly disastrous for the area since the Centre had been at the forefront of promoting stability over a long period. The Secretary of State, noting that Professor McWilliams had already been in touch with Mr Spence on the issue, said she would investigate the case to see what could be done. **(PS/Secretary of State to note).**

10. Professor McWilliams said she had earlier had a good meeting on victims with Mr Ingram but also raised the issue of FAIT and suggested that the funding of the organisation be looked at again in terms of the amount of befriending work it was actually carrying out. She considered FAIT was doing very little of this. The Secretary of State took note of the point for further consideration. **(PS/Mr Ingram for advice).**

11. Finally Professor McWilliams briefly mentioned that she was being sued for defamation of character by both Dr Paisley and his son following

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her comments on a BBC interview immediately after the fracas at the end of the curtailed Assembly debate on 18 January. BBC staff are apparently also in the DUP firing line. The case was in the early stages and might take some time to be heard, if at all. She agreed to keep the Secretary of State posted with regard to developments..

Tom Watson

T WATSON
Constitutional and Political Division
Castle Buildings Ext 22944