

820/97

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MINUTES OF PCC MEETING HELD ON 21 NOVEMBER 1997 IN ROOM 114,
PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

Mr McAuley 26/11
Mr Jones
LD
25/11

Present:

- Mr J Semple
- Mr P Carvill
- Mr G Loughran
- Mr R Spence
- Mr J Steele
- Mr P Small
- Mr C Gowdy
- Mr D Watkins
- Mr I Maye

In Attendance:

Mr D Ferguson

Apologies:

Mr Q Thomas



Minutes of the Last Meeting

1. The minutes of the last meeting were agreed:

Item 1: Political Development and Security Stocktake

2. Mr Semple introduced the item by reporting that he was currently working through a programme of introductory meetings with party leaders, discussing the political development process and, in parallel, the good governance of Northern Ireland. He was also briefed regularly by David Watkins and David Ferguson on progress in Talks. He outlined the current position in Talks. Position papers across all three strands had been deployed by all the participants and discussed in general terms. The first week of a fortnight of bilaterals in strands 1 & 2 had just been completed and, in parallel, the UUP had met the PM and Taoiseach. The Independent Commission's initial report on decommissioning was due for discussion at plenary subcommittee during the next week. the agenda for the plenary subcommittee dealing with confidence building measures had been agreed: it would start with discussions on prisoners, and move two weeks later to economic and social issues. The immediate objectives were to intensify contacts with the parties to see if key issues for a settlement could emerge before the review plenary in the first week in

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December, and for Senator Mitchell to identify key issues in an overall deal, followed by a subgroup to work on them.

3. Continuing, Mr Semple noted that there were difficult waters ahead, and that lack of progress on decommissioning and the UUP approach to Articles 2 & 3 of the Irish Constitution might overshadow the plenary. Sinn Fein were under pressure and frustrated by the UUP's refusal to engage. However, the bones of a settlement were evident from discussions over the past few weeks. Mr Ferguson added that the parties had not yet chosen to reveal their negotiating positions. The UUP in particular saw were intent on negotiating with the Prime Minister, rather than in Talks. On confidence building measures, he indicated that he would circulate a note to departments shortly to identify the broad economic and social agenda. The detailed agenda might not, however, emerge until just before the committee's discussion of the second item began. Mr Watkins indicated that Sinn Fein were engaging only slightly less than the UUP and were refusing to discuss strand 1 issues. The UUP's agenda was unclear: whether they were prepared to engage with the SDLP, or were simply trying to push Sinn Fein, the SDLP and the Irish into a corner to force a breakdown of Talks whilst avoiding the blame for the breakdown and preserving their relationship with the Prime Minister was debatable. Articles 2 & 3 were important to them and movement by the Irish, or a promise of movement, would provide them with cover to defend against DUP and UKUP criticism. In response to a question from Mr Small, Mr Watkins noted that the DUP and UKUP had failed to make an impact outside Talks; their rallies had attracted small numbers. Mr Ferguson added that there was evidence that some within the DUP wished to return to Talks. The Government was, in any event, keeping channels of communication open with the DUP.

4. On security, Mr Steele noted that the political process played into the security situation. He briefed PCC in some detail on what was known about the position within PIRA and Sinn Fein, and on the threat from the Continuity Army Council, INLA and the LVF. He also reported on recent normalisation measures and on

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physical security work which was underway. His overall assessment was that the ceasefires were holding reasonably well.

5. Following a general discussion of the political and security situation it was agreed that PCC should receive regular updates, and that members were free to exercise their discretion to brief departmental colleagues, recognising the sensitivity of the information which Mr Steele had provided. In addition, Mr Semple and Mr Steele emphasised the Secretary of State's and Minister's continuing concerns about leaks. They cautioned PCC colleagues to do their utmost to guard against leaks in their departments. Given the threat from the Continuity Army Council, they also noted that personal security precautions should be maintained.

Item 2: Chief Executive's Forum: Reconstitution of the Core Group

6. PCC agreed that John Hunter should be nominated to the Core Group, and that Mr Small should approach Danny McSorley with a view to his name being put forward as a second representative. Should Mr McSorley not wish to be nominated, then Robert Martin or Alan Shannon should be approached.

Item 3: Invitation to PCC Members to attend the Forum

7. Referring to Mr Ferguson's minute of 18 November, Mr Semple noted that several colleagues had already attended Forum Committee meetings and suggested that it might be best to accede to the Forum's request, making it clear that Permanent Secretaries were not accountable technically to the Forum. In terms of timing, he suggested that briefings should not take place until the New Year, and that he should attend first. Mr Ferguson added that Lord Dubs had also been invited to address the Forum, and that he would recommend that Lord Dubs and Mr Worthington should do so in the Spring. A lengthy and wide-ranging discussion followed, in which a variety of views were expressed, including the following points:

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- (i) the invitation was an opportunity for political posturing by the Forum. At the same time the Forum was running out of issues to discuss before the end of May;
 - (ii) it should be possible to seek an agenda from the Forum for each briefing, and to field the most appropriate officials (not necessarily the Permanent Secretaries);
 - (iii) officials who had attended Forum Committee meetings in the past had been given a hard time;
 - (iv) the options needed to be exposed to the Secretary of State.
8. Summing up the discussion, Mr Semple agreed that Mr Ferguson should prepare a draft submission to the Secretary of State setting out the arguments and the options in a balanced way. Mr Semple would circulate a draft of the submission to PCC colleagues before putting it to Ministers. **[Action: Mr Ferguson to prepare a draft submission].**

Item 4: Any Other Business

9. PCC agreed that it would be useful to arrange a meeting with Joe Pilling after his arrival in post. **[Action: Mr Maye]**
10. Mr Spence noted DOE's continuing difficulties with NIAO reports, and the media reaction to such reports. Morale within DOE and the wider Service was suffering as a result. The PAC report on BATs was due to be published in two weeks time. It too would be critical of DOE. Another report, on pollution control was still being negotiated with NIAO, and was likely to be equally critical. DOE and DANI had attempted for the past year to correct factual inaccuracies in the report, and were still doing so. A discussion followed on: relations with, and the handling of the NIAO; the need for staff in discretionary areas of expenditure to be fully aware of audit

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responsibilities, and the need to seek directions, or clear instructions for the file, from Ministers where actions are pursued at their behest. Mr Semple noted that DFP would reflect on how best to deal with audit issues, and circulate guidance. **[Action: Mr Maye to pursue with Mr Quinn]**

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