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From: Robert Crawford
Political Affairs Division
18 February 1998

cc PS/Mr Semple
Mr Thomas
Mr McCusker
Mr Bell
Mr Hill
Mr Maccabe
Mr Beeton
Mr Brooker
Mr Ferguson
Mr Fergusson, RID

4/
cc Mr Watkins

Mr Stephens

REFERENDUM PLANNING: FOCUS GROUP

Following up Ministers' interest in focus groups, I discussed this yesterday at length with Professor Seamus Dunn of the University of Ulster. Professor Dunn has considerable experience of organising such groups. For example, work carried out recently for CCRU included some consideration of the reaction of different groups in Northern Ireland (urban/rural, Unionist/Nationalist, male/female) to particular concepts, words and phrases. Dunn specifically mentioned "compromise" which to some groups (mainly Unionists) carries heavy connotations of a "sell-out", but to others (mainly Nationalists) carried no such meaning. Clearly, similar work could be very helpful in giving us a clearer picture of language to use and language to avoid drawing up the referendum question and in presenting this. Focus groups would also identify sensitive issues and concepts. I asked if they could show whether sensitivity about a particular issue perhaps related only to the language rather but not to the concept underlying it. He confirmed that this should be possible to identify positive reactions.

2. Professor Dunn assured me that UUJ could carry out this work without NIO involvement being apparent. It would be perfectly plausible for a university Politics Department to involve itself in such activity. Dunn also confirmed that the result would not be published. I said that we would probably wish to acquire ownership of the results, although it might be possible for them to be included in an academic

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paper at a later stage, provided the reason for their commissioning was not identified.

3. Without making any commitment, I asked him if it would be possible to organise a series of focus group between now and the end of March, with the results available in early April. He thought this should be (just) possible, although more time would be more beneficial in allowing for greater cross checking of responses. On cost, Dunn suggested that each focus group would cost about £700 to organise and that we might require about 10 groups. There would also be some cost to collating and presenting the results. Overall, he thought the cost might be in the order of £10,000.

4. Information Service will be employing consultants to look a media campaign in advance of the referendum. Some of the work of that agency will automatically and necessary involve the use of focus groups. There would however, be advantage in carrying out additional work on issues and language which would focus on language we might considering using as part of a referendum question and on language and concepts which Ministers might use as a part of a wider campaign.

5. In order to have this work completed in time, we would need to commission it almost immediately. I have asked Professor Dunn to provide a short proposal, which he has promised to have with me this week. I have also asked CCRU for details of the work carried out for them, and NISRE^A (the NI government statistics agency which commissioned the work on the CCRUs behalf) for a quick assessment of the University's capabilities and whether there are any other bodies which could do this work. If you are content that we should propose it, this could quickly be turned into a draft submission to Ministers. If we do wish to proceed, we would need to decide urgently:

- whether there is advantage in commissioning urgent work in this area;
- based on NISRE^A's advice, from whom we should commission it (we will need to explain to Ministers that time constraints prevent us from inviting a number of proposals); not have a budget for employing consultants). We might formally Commission via NISRE, presumably their budget could be argued as necessary.

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7. Professor Dunn confirmed he could start work immediately. If copy recipients are content, we could provide a draft submission to Ministers, arriving for inclusion in weekend boxes.

(Signed)

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