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cc PS/Sofs (L&B) - M ² 493/2.
PS/Mr Scott (L&B) - M pot 2
PS/Dr Mawhinney (L&B) - M
PS/PUS (L&B) - M
PS/Mr Bloomfield ✓
Mr Stephens
Mr Chesterton - M
Mr Ferneyhough
Mr Gilliland
Mr Innes
Mr Spence
Mr Bell - M
Mr Blackwell
Miss Elliott - M
Mr G Hewitt
Mr S Hewitt
Mr McConnell
Mr Ehrman - M



Mr Brennan - By Mufax

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS: PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH UNIONISTS

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1. I attach a disturbing assessment of the situation in the Province by Mr McConnell.
 2. It falls into two parts. The first describes developing reactions. In a nutshell, many people are beginning to believe that we are sliding rapidly into a 1974 situation. The evidence is building up. The Assembly debate on the Grand Committee Report confirms that things may move quickly. Peter Robinson expressed a preference for "the swift, firm and resolute turning of the screw". If DUP councillors defy the law and are sent to prison the nature of the game will change, perhaps decisively.
 3. The second part contains suggestions for action by us. I recognise that responsibility for recommendations in this respect lies elsewhere. But I offer some thoughts, in advance of the 17 February meeting on briefing for the PM's meeting with Unionist leaders.
 4. I believe that to offer more concessions to the Unionist politicians may be a fundamental mistake. Parts of Mr McConnell's minute suggest that we are being blamed for intransigence. I emphatically do not think that we should therefore yield. The more we are seen to react to pressure, the more pressure will be applied.
 5. The most important messages we have to get across are that the Agreement is here to stay; and that the Unionist leaders are taking the Province down a dangerous path. Mr McConnell's (5)

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summarises the main points.

6. Improved mechanisms of consultation may need to be considered where existing ones are inadequate (eg perhaps on security issues); but they should be kept to a minimum, and we should not delude ourselves into expecting grateful acceptance from Unionist leaders.

7. Demonstrating that the Conference is less sinister than the Unionists make out is vital. But we have to take the Irish along with us. I do not think that this should be impossible.

8. Mr McConnell's points about involving the Prime Minister may not all be practicable. But I see strong arguments for involving her personally to the maximum extent possible.

Mark Elliott

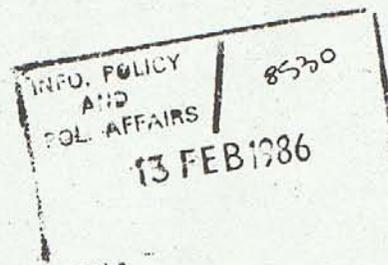
M ELLIOTT

14 February 1986

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PAB/1445/BN



Mr Elliott

cc: Mr Cornick

Over the past two or three weeks I have found myself increasingly feeling that events were getting more and more beyond our control and influence. The momentum of opposition to the Agreement amongst Unionists is growing - or at least shows no sign at all of diminishing - and is being successfully orchestrated to create a kind of hysteria of a sort reminiscent of the build up of the UWC strike in 1974. HMG has been forced into the position of reacting to each new twist of circumstances without being able to provide any convincing reassurance or calming influence. Indeed many people seem already to think that the Government no longer fulfils a useful purpose in Northern Ireland. Unionist leaders have successfully convinced a large section of the protestant population that the Government is the intransigent party and that confrontation is almost inevitable. This perception seems to have permeated parts of the office too. There is anecdotal evidence in my home town of Lisburn that the 'hardmen' are once again becoming increasingly prominent and that there are suggestions that 'organisation' is essential before it is too late. I am sure that much of this is merely gossip but it nevertheless continues and increases the process of conditioning the public to the inevitability and imminence of confrontation. The Panorama programme on 10 February followed the 'prepare and organise' theme which has gained so much currency and which is, frankly, extremely disconcerting to hear so repeatedly. Unionist leaders are, of course, at pains regularly to stir the pot and statements from McCrea and Maginnis have appeared virtually daily without much serious effort by HMG to rebut the fundamental premises of their arguments (though I am, of course, aware of Mr Scott's reply to Maginnis earlier this week.

The SDLP too are equally guilty of fostering confrontation and have certainly done nothing to reduce the temperature. I am firmly convinced that we are now in the position where it is absolutely essential in order to break this apparently inexorable downward spiral towards confrontation and violence to consider exceptional action designed specifically to demonstrate to all the people of Northern Ireland where routes presently being followed must inevitably lead. The longer

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we delay the more difficult the problem becomes and the closer we get to the marching season the higher the temperature will rise and the more likely major confrontation will become.

I do not pretend to know the answer, but I wonder if the Secretary of State should not consider some or all of the following possibilities as being able potentially to contribute towards a resolution of the present crisis (or the prevention of the one that is looming).

- a) The Prime Minister should make an official visit to Northern Ireland (apart from November 1985 she has not been here since December 1983) and her promised meeting with party leaders should take place here.
- b) Whilst in Northern Ireland the Prime Minister should hold a televised press conference (Hillsborough-style) during which she would spell out some of the realities of the current situation ie the Agreement is here to stay; the avenues of consultation which are available to unionists and the fact that it is they who seem to be striving to remove them; the consequences of major confrontation, both for commerce and industry and for the general fabric of society; the prospect of masked gunmen holding positions of power and influence in the community; the horror of a repetition of early 70's style sectarian assassinations and so on.
- c) The public should be told as fully as possible what transpires at the Prime Minister's meeting with Unionist leaders, whenever it takes place, and that should include offering them an expansion of the existing consultation process by allowing them regular access to the Chief Constable at meetings under the Chairmanship of the Secretary of State.

I would welcome the opportunity of an early discussion.


J E McCONNELL

Political Affairs Division

13 February 1986

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