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FROM: PUS  
27 OCTOBER 1994

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cc. Mr Feal - B

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE (L&B) - B

ms [handwritten]

cc - N. Pen  
M. Wa  
Mr. Dr  
M. H.

OPPOSITION NORTHERN IRELAND SPOKESMAN - OFFICIAL BRIEFING

Following Dr Mowlam's appointment as Opposition spokesman, it may be helpful to set out the groundrules for briefings by officials. The standing rules governing contacts between senior Civil Servants and leading members of the Opposition parties can be summarised as follows:

- (i) contacts on factual questions about Departmental organisation (typically before a General Election) must begin by a request from the party leader concerned to the Prime Minister. Subject to the latter's approval the approach is made direct to the Permanent Secretary who must keep in touch with the Head of the Home Civil Service;
- (ii) requests for briefing and information about Government policies should be dealt with at Ministerial level and in so far as officials take part in such discussion they should do so only in support of their Ministers or with their Ministers' express authority;
- (iii) where there is a request for briefing and it appears to touch on issues of Government policy, it is for the Permanent Secretary to consult the Ministerial Head of the Department. He will decide how it is to be handled but he is asked to report all such cases to the Prime Minister;
- (iv) more generally, Civil Servants should not be asked to engage in activities likely to call in question their political impartiality ("Questions of Procedures for Ministers", paragraph 55).

2. The Northern Ireland Office operates in circumstances which day by day require officials to act, with Ministerial authority, outside the ordinary conventions - the work of the Political Affairs Division in Belfast with the Northern Ireland parties being the most obvious example. Another is the regular briefing given by officials to all manner of visitors, including Opposition politicians, who come to Northern Ireland.

3. Policy briefing by officials in London for the Opposition Spokesman is however something that does need to be related to the established guidance and conventions. I recommend, therefore, that the Secretary of State should authorise me to inform No.10 of what is proposed by way of briefing Dr Mowlam, and that I should also tell Sir Robin Butler. Clearly, briefing should be confined to factual matters related to policy, but I see no difficulty for myself or my senior colleagues in staying clearly on the right side of the line and remaining politically impartial.

Signed:

JOHN CHILCOT

27 OCTOBER 1994