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POLITICAL AFFAIRS DIVISION
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- cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B
- PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) - B
- PS/Michael Ancram (DENI, B&L) - B
- PS/PUS (B&L) - B
- ~~PS/Mr Feeney~~ - B
- Mr Thomas - B
- Mr Legge - B
- Mr Williams - B
- Mr Bell - B
- Mr Steele - B
- Mr Shannon - B
- Mr Leach - B
- Mr Watkins - B
- Mr Stephens - B
- Mr Brooker - B
- Mr Collins - B
- Mr Lamont, RID - B
- HMA Dublin - B

C

W Mrs Brown
Mr Maxwell

Mrs Kenny (QA) Mr Durkan
LD23/1

Mr Maccabe

DISCUSSIONS WITH ALEX ATTWOOD AND MARK DURKAN

I have had separate discussions recently with Alex Attwood, SDLP leader in Belfast City Council, and Mark Durkan, Chairman of the Party. Much of what both said was perhaps predictable but a number of points are worth recording.

Peace Process

2. Both maintained that the Government was not moving quickly enough to cement the peace process, Attwood claiming that progress would be dictated by Unionists who were not prepared to move an inch and the British Government which moved only inch by inch. That said, he drew encouragement from developments over the last week, namely the ending of daytime patrolling by the army in greater Belfast (now characterised by Durkan as "an army of vampires"), the Secretary of State's Belfast Telegraph article, the statement that the handing over of weapons was not a pre-condition to Sinn Fein entering all party talks, and encouraging signals on the possibility of meetings between Ministers and Sinn Fein down the line.

C O N F I D E N T I A L

15309/LO

C O N F I D E N T I A L

3. Attwood claimed that the peace was very fragile and he was wary of what grassroots republicans were thinking. Up to now the peace had been imposed from on high by the republican leadership and he believed it could easily "fracture" - earlier than some might think, although he did not offer any timescale. Both also believed that Ministers had missed a trick over handling of Christmas home leave. As Durkan put it, if the Government had been able to reduce the criteria for home leave to 11 years when terrorism was ongoing, how much easier it would have been for a reduction to 10 years in a time of peace. Such a move, he claimed, would have had a disproportionate effect on the mood of republicans and with little risk to the Government's standing with the wider public who were generally ignorant of the applied criteria in any case. Attwood, in addition, made a strong plug for early movement on the reintegration of prisoners into the community. As a member of the Probation Board, he spoke passionately in favour of the funding of employment offices for the resettlement of paramilitary prisoners.

4. As far as Londonderry was concerned, Durkan argued for the removal of the watchtowers - particularly Rosemount. Most people in Londonderry, he claimed, could not understand why they were built in the first place at a time when the city was being heralded as one of the success stories of the troubles. Now, with the ceasefires, their supposed need, on security grounds, was baffling.

Local Government

5. With vastly different experiences of how City Councils operate - Attwood total frustrated with the constant squabbling and party politicking of Belfast City Council while Durkan spoke proudly of the inter-party co-operation on Derry City Council - both clearly resented the makeup of the invitation list to the Prime Minister's meeting next week with Council Chairmen and Chief Executives. Irrespective of the objectives of the meeting, both felt strongly that the Government was following a Unionist agenda and that it

C O N F I D E N T I A L

15309/LO

31

C O N F I D E N T I A L

eeded to show that that was not the case. They hoped, Attwood in particular, that the Prime Minister would use the opportunity of the meeting to promote the benefits of partnership in Local Government: or if not on that occasion, then very shortly thereafter. Attwood argued that the SDLP in Belfast City Council had offered a number of symbolic gestures - appearance at the Cenotaph; the forthcoming appearance at the swearing in of Alderman Parkes as the new High Sheriff; and their public backing for Hugh Smith as Lord Mayor - yet had received nothing whatsoever in return. Perhaps the time had come for the Government to take a stance such as refusing to hold any future Investment Forum or other gathering in Belfast until inter-party co-operation began. One slightly encouraging development was that the SDLP representatives on the Council, in the form of Attwood and Stephenson, would shortly be entering discussions with Cobain and McCausland of the UUP to discuss prospects for future co-operation. Attwood, however, was under no illusion that prospects for these discussions were high.

Framework Document

6. Durkan took a pessimistic line on the prospects for all party talks once the Framework Document and the British Government's own document on Strand 1 were published. His fear was the development of ~~two track discussions with Unionists insisting on negotiating on~~ the basis of the Strand 1 document, while pro-united Ireland parties would seek to concentrate on the details of the Framework Document and its North-South emphasis. He feared Unionists would have little inclination or incentive to engage in the meat of the Framework Document, with the result that the agreement of March 1991 on how talks should continue could be shattered. The onus was on the two Governments, but particularly the British Government, to ensure that that was not the case.

State of the Party

7. Attwood was more open than Durkan, perhaps not surprisingly, in talking about the relationships within the SDLP. [REDACTED]

C O N F I D E N T I A L

[REDACTED]

While differences remained between Mallon and Hume, the former would still defer to the latter's judgement. The fact that Mallon had been allowed to effectively lead the party's representation at the Forum in Dublin, Attwood claimed, had done much to improve the relationship between the two men. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Views on Irish Government

8. Both Councillors confirmed that the SDLP had maintained contact with Fine Gael, when in opposition, and that those contacts were continuing. Durkan told me that the party would be having a meeting with the Irish Government next week. He felt that Bruton had been wise to retain his council over the last few weeks on Northern Ireland. Any tendency to give knee jerk reactions could have been damaging to the peace process as Sinn Fein, in particular, were assessing his position. Attwood was less charitable, claiming (rightly so) that Bruton was in a relatively weak position - the Taoiseach had given in to his coalition partners on virtually everything so far - and he expected Dick Spring to take the lead on Northern Ireland issues, perhaps adopting a much harder line than previously. Attwood also believed that the media was over-emphasising Sean Donlon's potential importance in Northern Ireland affairs. Yes, he was a friend of Hume but, in a three party coalition, Attwood was convinced that most of his time would be spent on keeping a handle on the Departmental Programme Managers. As far as Attwood was concerned, as long as Sean O'hUiginn remained in charge of Anglo-Irish relations, then he would be happy!

C O N F I D E N T I A L

15309/LO