

CONFIDENTIAL**From: PETER SMALL, DANI****23 September 1998***P file - Per xos file 85**5118*

24 SEP 1998

Small

cc: NI Permanent Secretaries
 Mr McCusker
 Mrs Brown
 Mr Ferguson
 Mr Sweeney
 Mr McNeill

MR J L SEMPLE:

MEETING WITH FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

You asked for some thoughts on how we might handle the meeting with the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on Monday night.

I am not clear as to whether this meeting is at our request or at the suggestion of the First Minister. Certainly, if it is the latter, we will simply need to respond initially to the points which he has in mind and in that respect it would, of course, be helpful to know what might be on the agenda. Leaving that aside, however, there will still be points which we will wish to register regardless of at whose behest the meeting is taking place. Also, I would see the key objective being to make a start on developing a relationship with the First and Deputy First Ministers.

It will be important that at this early stage we are not seen to be covering issues which could be interpreted as the Senior Civil Service pursuing its own interests or its own agenda. In that sense I believe we should avoid raising the question of Departmental structures and only deal with that in response to points made by Messrs Trimble and Mallon. I also think we should avoid dealing with specific Departmental concerns at this stage since that is unlikely to be a good use of time.

Against the background of the above I think we need to concentrate on getting across some key messages. These might include the following:-

- (a) A commitment of our absolute loyalty and support to the First and Deputy First Minister, this may seem to be stating the obvious but, given the backcloth, it is something which needs to come out clearly. Under this head it would be helpful if we had an opportunity to refute the suggestion that senior officials have for years been working to their own agenda, which has not necessarily been in the best interests of Northern Ireland. If possible, we should take the opportunity of dealing with this perception and link to it the underlying suspicions which we know certainly David Trimble has about the

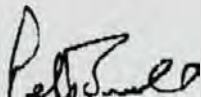
CONFIDENTIAL
 DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
 FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

CONFIDENTIAL

Civil Service. I have some reservations about the wisdom of our raising the "suspicion" point, which might be better dealt with in reaction rather than proactively.

- (b) We should draw out the importance of the development of a programme for Government. It will be essential, however, that we get across the point that there will inevitably be constraints, in particular the outcome of the CSR, although there are clearly dangers in raising this in advance of the formal consultation. I would also be keen to get across the point that a Northern Ireland Government will not be operating in isolation nor with the degree of freedom that was enjoyed pre-1971. The inter-dependence of the various parts of the United Kingdom, the role of the European Community and the creation of North/South bodies create parameters within which any new Government will have to work. The continuing high level of cash subvention from the rest of the UK to Northern Ireland is also an important factor.
- (c) While it will be difficult to achieve subtly, I think we do need to get across the fact that the Civil Service will have a crucial role to play in the development of successful Government in Northern Ireland. In a nutshell, the politicians cannot make success of this without the Civil Service and the public service more generally. We owe it to our staff to register the point that the Civil Service is made up of a group of generally very hard working and committed people, all of whom will react very positively to working for locally-elected Ministers.

Finally, one of the difficult issues I think we need to discuss on Friday night is the overall demeanour and tone of our dealings with the First and Deputy First Ministers. While on the one hand we do want to get across to them clearly that they can rely on our absolute loyalty, we should also be prepared to challenge, robustly, any misconceptions about our past performance, our perceived self-importance, and any suggestion that we have somehow failed the people of Northern Ireland over the past twenty-five years. As in most things, getting the balance right on this issue will be important and my own view is that we should not go into this meeting in too defensive a frame of mind.



P J SMALL

Permanent Secretary

☎ 24608



DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND



Internal Memo

CONFIDENTIAL



*Pl. file Len Sec meeting
85*

From: R B Spence
Permanent Secretary

Your ref:
Our ref: PSE 500/98

Spence

Tel: (5)41175/6

Date: 21 September 1998

*5081
22 SEP 1998*

To: Mr Semple

cc: Mr Carvill
Mr Loughran
Mr Small
Mr Gowdy
Mr Hamilton
Mr McCusker
Mrs D Brown
Mr Ferguson
Mr Sweeney
PSG

MEETING WITH FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

You asked for suggestions about the key issues which might be explored at this forthcoming meeting:-

1. Tackling the Suspicions

I believe that we must take head on the lack of trust of senior civil servants by some senior Assembly Members. We should say that senior officials look forward very much to working with local Ministers to help them devise policies and priorities appropriate to NI's needs. We should be frank about the frustrations which senior officials have faced over the last 25 years in serving Direct Rule Ministers who can give only limited time to Departmental business, change frequently, and are seeking to implement policies decided in London for GB, rather than NI, conditions. We should also express some relief that we will be posing much of the representational role which often fell to senior officials

CONFIDENTIAL

7/10/98



because of the time pressures on Direct Rule Ministers. Finally, we should reject robustly any suggestions that senior officials have been following their own agenda and that we have had too much power; officials have been criticised very unfairly for implementing unpopular decisions taken by Ministers.

2. Regional Government

I think that we should stress the point that NI is fortunate to have a strong politically neutral, honest and experienced public sector. It is, in reality, one of the region's strengths. It can now, under political direction of Ministers answerable to a local electorate, be a very powerful tool for change. Ministers will, therefore, want to use its potential to the full and we are eager to play our part. However, they should be cautious about fragmenting responsibilities. We need fewer functional silos, more "joined-up" Government, and a better focus on disadvantaged areas and people. Providing better government through an artificial coalition will not be easy at a political level and will need effective central co-ordination and good inter-departmental working relationships at civil service level.

3. Reforming Government

I believe that we should recognise that the public sector can at times appear slow and bureaucratic and that public servants do sometimes make mistakes! But we should defend strongly our professionalism, impartiality and integrity. Government is becoming more complex. There are many other conflicting considerations to be taken into account. The public's expectations are higher than ever. While we should not defend "a slow no", "a quick yes" may not be the right, long term decision. As a public service, we are constantly seeking to

CONFIDENTIAL



improve how we carry out our responsibilities and to deliver better value for money. We need political support for that effort. We believe also that Ministers will face major challenges in making the new political structures work and that they need to address radically the whole structure of government in Northern Ireland.

4. Programme for Government

We should encourage Messrs Trimble and Mallon to initiate thinking about the possible shape of a Programme for Government. This will be no easy task given the resource realities and the different views and priorities of the Parties which may provide Ministers. However, there is a basis for some initial drafting in the Good Friday Agreement, the issues which Departments know have to be addressed over the next couple of years; the party manifestos and the preliminary discussions with each Party. Starting the preparation of a programme for Government might also inject greater realism into discussions about the outcome of the CSR and about creating new Departments.

RBS

R B SPENCE

CONFIDENTIAL