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From: T Watson  
Constitutional and Political Division  
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cc see list below



*Mr Mc Auley*  
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NOTE FOR THE RECORD

SECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETING WITH PUP: TUESDAY 27 OCTOBER

As part of a series of meetings with the Assembly parties, the Secretary of State and Mr Murphy met a delegation from the Progressive Unionist Party in Castle Buildings at 14.05 yesterday. Mr Jeffrey, Mr Warner and I were also present. The PUP delegation comprised David Ervine, Hugh Smyth, William Smith, Billy Hutchinson, Winston Rea and Tom Winston. The meeting lasted for 40 minutes and was friendly and good humoured throughout.

2. The Secretary of State opened by asking the PUP for their assessment of the current impasse and what options there might be for moving forward. Mr Ervine said the process was now suffering from the scenario of "chickens coming home to roost" - a reference, as he put it, to the price being paid for the Prime Minister's earlier interventions in the process namely the letter from him to David Trimble prior to the Agreement being concluded and the manuscript pledges delivered in Coleraine before the referendum. Consequently the UUP leader could take comfort from these and, in a sense, leave it to the Prime Minister to move the process forward.

3. The Secretary of State asked what options, if any, were open to the UUP leader. Mr Ervine said it was difficult to provide an accurate assessment of the Trimble position. The UUP leader rarely talked to anyone in the PUP so when it was told that Trimble would like to move forward but the "mathematics" seemed to have him trapped, it was difficult to judge how much of this was a party line or a true reflection. Mr Ervine continued by saying that the UUP conference on Saturday past had been a disaster for those in the unionist community who wanted to see the process move forward. Despite the remarks from Jim Wilson, the message had been loud and clear and Trimble, as a result, now appeared to be caught, like a rabbit, in the headlights of the DUP/UKUP. Mr Ervine again pointed to the real difficulties of assessing a true picture of Trimble's room for manoeuvre, not just within the party but in mainstream unionism, but his assessment was that the UUP leader had only one real option - to make a cut and run with it. Put another way, Trimble had to try and arrive at a form of words which would be sufficiently acceptable to keep Sinn Fein in the frame (without prior decommissioning), permit

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him to form a shadow Executive and keep most of the UUP Assembly party with him. A tall order but the only viable one as far as the PUP was concerned.

4. Mr Ervine made the point that if the Assembly went down, and this could not be ruled out as a consequence of the current impasse, unionists would initially get the blame. However in a situation where Prime Ministers had to deal with and manage a divided society again, the focus would shift away from unionists and be replaced by nationalists seeking to have their democratic rights fulfilled. In the short term the SDLP might be reasonable in its demands on this front but Sinn Fein would be rampant and the Prime Minister would be wounded not just at home but internationally. This was hardly what the Government wanted. Mr Ervine said the process was, at present, relying heavily on the tolerance levels of the SDLP but these could not extend for ever and there were a few signs that the Deputy First Minister was beginning to lose patience.

5. As to the PUP's own ideas for moving forward, the party returned to the point about the potential for collapse of the Assembly and wondered whether pressure should be put on Assembly members to think carefully about their "future parliamentary careers" in the context of continued deadlock. The Secretary of State touched on review mechanisms and clarified the position as to who carried out any such review of progress on implementing the Agreement. She added that it would be indefensible for the Government to continue with the process if the current impasse still remained at the end of the year. This reference, coupled with the effect such a review might have on prisoner releases as part of the Agreement, immediately rang a few alarm bells in the PUP delegation. However Mr Ervine did not totally dismiss the earlier notion and agreed with Mr Murphy's thoughts that opportunities presented themselves next week in Brussels to perhaps plant a seed with Assembly members. Mr Smyth added a note of caution suggesting that too much overt trailing of such a possibility might play straight into the hands of the DUP who had consistently argued for a new process and a new Agreement since their departure from the talks. Another proposal put forward by Mr Ervine, which the Secretary of State agreed to consider further, was the commissioning of opinion polls which might, if the appropriate questions were asked, seek to reflect a public view of wishing to see the process move forward.

5. The Secretary of State said it was important that some forward movement be gained from the meetings proposed on Thursday. Something concrete was required to get over the 31 October date but the only way of getting movement from Sinn Fein was to continue to make progress in other areas of the Agreement. There was little point adopting bullying tactics since Sinn Fein didn't respond to threats. The bottom line was that Sinn Fein needed something on the North/South axis and Trimble required language from Sinn Fein on decommissioning. If the latter was

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achieved and Trimble still didn't move, his position could become untenable in terms of fulfilling the obligations in the Agreement.

6. Mr Murphy inquired whether there might still be some mileage in an earlier idea of appointing shadow Ministers without forming an Executive. Would the PUP consider this as worth pursuing at Thursday's meetings? Mr Ervine said an increasing difficulty for the UUP was not the issue of decommissioning but sharing power with Sinn Fein. William Ross had stated such sentiments in a television programme the previous week. That said, Mr Ervine offered the view that his party was wholly divergent from all other unionist positions yet there was no apparent loss of grass roots support. If this was the position within the PUP, could Trimble not run forward on this basis?

7. The PUP moved on to raise some concerns on the Northern Ireland Bill and in particular on human rights and equality issues. Mr Murphy pointed out that in most cases on the equality side, the parties concerns would be reflected in amendments at Report stage. Mr Murphy did point out that there had been no consensus between the parties on investigating powers and hence provisions had been excluded. The Bill would, however, contain a much shorter review mechanism of two rather than three years.

8. On implementation bodies, the PUP expressed itself content with identifying these by the end of this week. The delegation did, however, state its preference to see the structure and make up of the Northern Ireland departments before identifying such implementation bodies. The party's response to the Secretary of State seeking some rationale for this particular sequence was less convincing.

9. Summarising, the PUP said there wasn't a great deal of good news around at the present time but it intended to keep the process moving forward during Thursday's meetings. The Secretary of State asked that she be kept informed of any developments following the round table discussions so that any action that was needed could be undertaken on Friday. Before leaving the PUP raised a couple of unrelated matters which the Secretary of State agreed to investigate and report back on in due course.

Signed: Tom Watson

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