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Secure Fax: 1203**6 December 1996****No of pages including this one: 3****To: HQ****From: Belfast****For: Second Secretary O hUiginn****From: Joint Secretary****Subj: Preparation for meeting between Taoiseach and Prime Minister**

1. I have had a word with Peter Bell about the outcome of consultations this morning at official level on the British side in preparation for Monday's meeting between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister.
2. The British see this as an opportunity for some fence-mending following the disagreement over last Thursday's statement. The Prime Minister will want to impress on the Taoiseach that the British Government are genuinely committed to achieving an inclusive process and are not simply looking for pretexts to keep Sinn Féin out of talks between now and the election. He will emphasise that his recent statement did not seek to change the goal-posts in any way. He will, however, continue to insist that the ball lies in Sinn Féin's court in terms of fulfilling the conditions set by the two Governments.
3. While officials may suggest ways of presenting this message in more positive terms from Sinn Féin's perspective, it is unlikely that the Prime Minister will be receptive. Current Parliamentary pressures on the European front, which will no doubt be reflected during the earlier part of his meeting with the Taoiseach, are weakening his domestic position and reducing the extent to which he will feel able to risk offending his right-wing critics in the party. By the same token, he will be worried about Unionist reactions. He will be concerned to avoid giving any impression that he is altering in a direction more favourable to Sinn Féin the terms set out in last Thursday's statement.
4. I reiterated the arguments for an adjustment of the Prime Minister's position which would provide Sinn Féin with a definite reassurance about their entry into talks following the Christmas recess if the conditions laid down by the two Governments are fulfilled in the interim. Bell said that officials are expecting the Taoiseach to

present the Prime Minister with a case for the indication of a date on this basis and that they privately hope (though without much confidence) that this may have a persuasive effect.

5. British officials also expect a short review of the position reached on decommissioning at the talks. The line the Prime Minister will probably take on the Chairman's proposal is that they are very happy for Senator Mitchell to shoulder some of the burden for finding a way forward and will give him all possible assistance. However, there is a key political requirement to bring the Unionists along and the British Government believe that their own paper of 14 November offers a better prospect of achieving this than the approach outlined by the Senator this week.
6. Revisiting much of the ground covered in our earlier contacts this week with the British side, Bell emphasised the potential of their paper to offer "a bit of camouflage" which would get the Unionists into three-stranded talks while awaiting a judgement by the Commission - a judgement which could, indeed, be delayed for some time. In contrast, the Chairman's approach envisages the fairly rapid production of a report on modalities by the Commission followed by its own suspension until it acquires a more operational role. This, the British feel, could cause unease among the Unionists, who would prefer to see a continuing and visible Commission involvement.
7. I challenged the apparent British acceptance of conditionality in relation to Unionist participation in the three-stranded talks. I also questioned the British persistence with their 14 November paper, whose approach has not only failed to win the Irish Government's support or that of other delegations but has so far, it would appear, drawn an indifferent response even from its intended beneficiaries.
8. I asked about the written comments which the UUP reportedly forwarded to the British Government last Monday and which seemed encouraging to Quentin Thomas. Bell replied that these were fairly minimalist and even trivial comments by Ken Maginnis which proposed a more technical role for the Commission and an alternative title to make this clear (something on the lines of Decommissioning Modalities and Verification Commission). Maginnis also indicated some reservations about a judgement in this key area being left to the Commission.
9. It would appear that the only reason these comments were interpreted as a positive

view of the British proposal is that they did not indicate outright hostility to the latter. The presentation which the British are putting on matters is that, as there has not yet been a full discussion of the proposal with Trimble, it is too early to regard the UUP view of it as negative. It would appear that they expect a positive verdict to be delivered by the party leader before long (if, indeed, this has not already happened) and that they will hope to sell the proposal to us and the SDLP by suggesting that the "call" could be deferred until a late stage in the negotiations.

9. I emphasised once again that the British proposal for such a "call" is at odds with the terms of the Mitchell Report and a blatant retreat towards Washington Three. Bell replied that, on the contrary, the British regard their proposal as compatible with Mitchell. They do not see a way of getting into three-stranded talks without giving the Unionists the cover of an opinion being offered by the Commission but they do not accept that this is tantamount to a peremptory approach to decommissioning.