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PS/Secretary of State

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'MEET THE MINISTERS' NEWS CONFERENCE, 5 MAY 1997

I attach a copy of the transcript of yesterday's news conference for your information.

GRAHAM THOMPSON
InD Publicity Section
Rm 130
SAH
Ext 2710

May 6, 1997

Transcript of 'Meet the Ministers' News Conference at The Scottish Office,
May 5, 1997

Secretary of State: First of all can I thank you for coming, and can I also say how delighted I am to find myself here. That is a form of words which I used in many unlikely circumstances, but never more genuinely.

It is a great thrill to be at The Scottish Office, and I am very very pleased to be surrounded by what you see is the core of an extremely effective and able team. I suspect that introductions are hardly required but for the interest of greater accuracy we have of course:

Henry McLeish who will be Minister of State in charge of Home Affairs and Devolution. We have Mr Brian Wilson who is also a Minister of State and will be in charge of Education and Industry, and we have Parliamentary Under Secretaries Malcolm Chisholm who will be Minister for Local Government and Transport, and Sam Galbraith who will be Minister for Health and the Arts. That is obviously, I use the phrase, the core of the team. We will be having an additional appointment obviously in the House of Lords very shortly, but I am anxious to make clear the Commons Team now that it is appointed - particularly with the typical ingenuity of the Press, I notice in any event that certain rumours were precolating, and it seems to me to be no bad thing to produce them open and above board.

I am particularly pleased because we have of course an additional Minister, which reflects the enormous responsibilities of The Scottish Office and the particular excitements of the constitutional programme. I am also very pleased that the Prime Minister saw fit to appoint two Ministers of State which again is very much a recognition of the importance of the work which we will be doing. This is basically as I say an introductory photo call, but can I make it very clear that the programme that we have is going to be a broad ranging one but of course our particular priority is the devolution bill. The time table that we have set ourselves is formidable and I want to stress that we have every intention of holding to it, clearly there may be many excitements on the road, but there is a tremendous commitment and I have no doubt at all that we will succeed and I believe it is very much in the national interest that we do. But can I also say that this is not a Department that will be obsessed or concerned only with one area of activity, and there is much to be done in Education and

Housing and Health and the Environment and the breadth of the team and the weight of the team I think is evidence that we can cope with that and hopefully offer good government and an effective service right across the range of our responsibilities.

I am looking forward to the challenge enormously as I know my colleagues are. Perhaps I can say it I think they are a remarkably able collection. I believe that they will have the commitment and the drive to do the job and I regard myself as very lucky to be team leader in that sense, and I can promise you, think of the ladies and gentlemen concerned, that this will be one department where personal relations will not be a problem.

Now I think that is all I really want to say at this stage - I do not want to get into a lengthy discussion of detailed policy because there is going to be a great deal more to be said and as we are in position we will be wanting to come to you with information and news. As I say given the tremendous pressure of time and the need to maintain the momentum I hope to be able to come back to you very very shortly indeed. However if there are any general points I will take a couple of questions.

Q1. Secretary of State, could you outline just roughly the timetable you see for the constitutional change in legislation.

Secretary of State: Well we are obviously looking at that now and at the practicalities. What I have made clear is that we have manifesto commitments indeed commitments that go back indeed almost as far as myself and that is saying something - and therefore we are very very committed to delivering on them. We are of course very conscious of the need for proper parliamentary scrutiny and for proper public debate when we seek the endorsement of the people in the referendum. I do not want to give you a precise date at the moment but you can be certain that we will not be allowing the programme to slip that is certainly a priority for me personally.

Q2. Mr Forsyth made some dire warnings and threats in his last 48 hours in office about the sort of first information you would get...[indistinct]...has any of that turned out to be true or was it just a block from Mr Forsyth?

Secretary of State: I think people say desperate things in the dying days. I think it must have been very difficult for the Tories in the last few days of that election campaign and perhaps I should say no more than that. But I have had a enormously worthwhile three days - it is only 2 or 3 days but the courtesy and efficiency which is an important characteristic with which I have been inducted, I am beginning to believe that the Labour slogan about "lifetime learning" has real meaning in my case and I am thoroughly enjoying the experience. The important thing for any Minister moving into a complex portfolio is to get possession of the facts and to look at the options in a balanced way. That is essential but it does not mean unnecessary delay.

Q3. Will there be much specifically Scottish legislation in the Queen's Speech next week?

Secretary of State: I think my tenure in The Scottish Office might be of record short duration, if I advise you of the contents of the Queen's Speech. Well I think there has been some speculation about, there might be some provision for constitutional legislation and of course I would not encourage you to speculate, I never do as you know, but if you do speculate you do it on your own responsibility.

Q4. Secretary of State there is the suggestion from the other side that the bill going through the House of Parliament will not be blocked.

Secretary of State: As that is a helpful suggestion I am not going to say what I was going to say which is 'what other side?' I think the answer is that we will go forward at the many problems and particular problems that there are. We will I hope and I believe be enormously buttressed by popular consent in the referendum, and I hope that whoever may be minded to oppose - of course people are entitled and indeed ought to make constructive criticisms and try and argue for improvements that is part of the process and I would certainly want that to be done - but anyone who is minded to be obstructive for the sake of obstruction or who have malice in their arguments, I hope that they will look at the case for change illustrated on the first of May and I believe that will be reinforced in the referendum results and recognise that this is an important and enormously radical but constructive reform of the government of the United Kingdom which ought to be put in place and which will greatly improve the government of Scotland.