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To: HQ
For: Secretary Gallagher

From: Belfast
From: Joint Secretary

*My. to Conaghan
Not passed on -
eventually by event
18.5.98*

Subj: Visit by Prime Minister to NI

1. As I mentioned yesterday, the security attaching to the Prime Minister's visit to Northern Ireland today is intense (partly because of the recent threat to British Cabinet members from the "real IRA"). Because of this, information about the visit is being kept within an extraordinarily tight circle and it has proved very difficult to extract details.
2. However, what we have established is that the Prime Minister will arrive in the late afternoon, will spend a few hours in Belfast (an earlier plan to visit Coleraine has been dropped) and will return to London in the late evening. The centrepiece will be a speech at the Balmoral Conference Centre, scene of his first major speech on NI roughly a year ago. He will also have meetings with victims' groups and with prison officers.
3. I spoke this morning to Jonathan Stephens about the content of the speech. Stephens tells me that he has not seen a final draft (we understand that he may have had some earlier input to the drafting). He suggested, indeed, that there may be no finished text prior to the Prime Minister's appearance at Balmoral. We have, of course, been seeking a copy of the speech here since yesterday but have been told that it is highly unlikely that anything will be available in advance.
4. Stephens sketched out, however, the likely content of the speech as he understands it. It will extol the benefits of the Agreement, making clear that it must be approached as a whole and that there can be no cherry-picking. In particular, it will point to the

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various safeguards of relevance to Unionist concerns. Echoing language used by Trimble in the Commons yesterday, the Prime Minister will make the point that nobody can expect to get the benefits available under the Agreement without living up to the commitments entered into under it.

5. In relation to decommissioning, the Prime Minister will reiterate that this is an integral part of the Agreement and that he wants to see action taken on it over time. I am told, however, that there will be no explicit reference to decommissioning as a test in relation to either the holding of Ministerial office or prisoner releases.
6. His approach will be to set out a range of factors which will be taken into account in assessing whether a party is complying with its commitments under the Agreement. These factors, he will indicate, will be reflected in legislation. Particular emphasis will be attached to cooperation with the Independent Commission. Other criteria - on the lines of those indicated by the Prime Minister in his conversation with the Taoiseach yesterday - will include the abandonment of paramilitary violence for good and some indication that the group linked to the party concerned is no longer acting as a paramilitary organisation.
7. On the abandonment of violence, I am told that no particular prominence will be given to punishment beatings.
8. I asked what exactly was intended with the second point. Stephens said that they have in mind the progressive dismantling of the structures of paramilitary organisations. I pointed out that, however desirable an objective, this is not covered in the Agreement and the Prime Minister would be exceeding his remit in making any reference to it. Stephens emphasised the word "progressive" and said that what the Prime Minister will be looking for is "a dynamic over time". The British view is that, if decommissioning by the IRA is to happen, this must necessarily have consequences for the structure and very existence of the Provisionals.
9. In discussion, he suggested that, in so far as all participants have made a commitment to the total disarmament of paramilitary organisations and to "use any influence they may have" to achieve decommissioning within two years, this process, if successful, could be represented as having automatic implications for the structures of the relevant organisations and, accordingly, meeting the Prime Minister's point. I said

that we would reflect on this point but that any language used by the Prime Minister on this subject, as on any other, would have to meet the test of strict consistency with the terms used in the Agreement. It would be one thing to express a personal hope; it would be quite another to suggest that a commitment of this kind is contained in the Agreement.

10. Stephens confirmed that there will be no detailed discussion of the envisaged prisoner release arrangements (i.e., that the point about decommissioning being introduced as a factor at the two-year mark, which arose last night and on which I re-emphasised our concerns, will not feature in tonight's speech).
11. Finally, he indicated that the Prime Minister's speech will reproduce some of the sentiments from last year's Balmoral speech which Unionists found reassuring