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5 June. 1997.

Mr. Seán O hUiginn,
Second Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Division,
St. Stephen's Green,
DUBLIN 2.

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5/6 ✓

COPY TO:

MR O'DONNELL

MR HICKEY

MR BROSNAN

MR [unclear]

MR CALAGHAN

MS LARKINS

PST: PSS: Messrs. Feanoh.
Danton & Dalton:
Ambassadors London &
Washington: Joint Secretary:
Counsellors A-I

Handwritten:
HMC
TODAY
Decover

Dear Secretary,

Call on Paul Murphy, Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office

I called to see Paul Murphy at his office in the NIO today. Murphy, who is known to me personally since his time in opposition, is a regular contact of the Embassy's, and I have met him on several occasions on my visits to South Wales. In addition to taking over the Michael Ancram job as Minister for political development he has responsibility for Finance, Personnel and Information within the NIO. My meeting was one of a series of calls I am making on the new Labour Ministers. I will see Mo Mowlam on the 13th and Richard Ingram on the 16th. I am also having lunch with John Chilcot on the 12th.

As you know the NIO have moved into new offices on Millbank just beside the Houses of Parliament. Murphy's has fine views across the Thames and he is clearly proud of it, showing it to me in a slightly self-deprecatory manner, "what's a poor boy from Wales doing in a plush space like this". He has installed on the wall behind his desk a large dark painting of miners at work to, as he put it, remind him where he came from, his father having been a miner in South Wales. The new leather furniture in the room still has its labels. Ingram's office is just opposite Murphy's and they appear to have a new arrangement to pool private office staff in the space between their two offices.

Copies of the Irish Times and the Irish Independent were spread out on the table, and when I entered Murphy was looking at the coverage of the election and of last night's debate between the Taoiseach and the Leader of the Opposition.

During our conversation which lasted over an hour I formed the impression of someone who was still coming to terms with the details of his brief, and Murphy admitted that he was reading himself in. He specified that he is trying simultaneously to understand Paisley's Protestantism and the ideology behind extreme republicanism. He is, understandably at this stage, more comfortable with larger political and electoral issues than with the details of the talks process. The main points of our conversation are reported below.

Labour's Victory

I congratulated Murphy on his own election in Tarfaen, where he has a majority of 25,000, and on his appointment as Minister of State. He said that the scale of the victory and of Labour's majority had surprised everyone. But it had brought into Parliament on the Labour benches people who were unknown and untried. The new Government had surprised even its own supporters in the speed with which it had moved in its first month in office on financial and European issues and indeed on Northern Ireland. He wondered whether the momentum could be kept up.

Northern Ireland

I said that we welcomed the new impetus given to Northern Ireland issues by the Labour Government instancing the Prime Minister's meetings with the Taoiseach, the Prime Ministers's visit to Northern Ireland and his speech, the prominence given to the issue during President Clinton's visit, the Secretary of State's hands on approach, and the Prime Minister's statement on the Famine. Combined they gave the impression of a Government that was keeping its promise to give the peace process priority and to bring a new momentum to the talks. Murphy agreed. Tony Blair, whom he referred to as "the boss", had established Northern Ireland at the top of his agenda and was determined to push for a settlement. He was also determined to communicate this more clearly than Major did to public opinion - hence the moving train analogy which, according to Murphy, had captured people's imagination. On a general

point Murphy said that Labour would seek to translate complex policies into images that the public could understand and that was one of the reasons why Peter Mandelson has been given the task of coordinating and presenting Government policy.

The Belfast Talks and Decommissioning

Murphy indicated that one round of talks in Belfast was not sufficient to enable him to form a clear view of the process. But he had been told by old hands that the atmosphere on Tuesday had been more muted and less acrimonious than before - perhaps, he suggested, because many of the participants were jet-lagged after their return from South Africa. He acknowledged that decommissioning was a key issue and would need to be resolved quickly. He agreed that the two Governments were nearer agreement now and he hoped that official level discussions could iron out remaining difficulties to enable the Chair to table the proposals. He thought a set of proposals from the Chair would carry more weight and status than one from the two Governments.

I indicated our hope for early agreement in order to deal with and remove one of the potentially most destructive issues in the process. I said that the new British paper offered a reasonable basis for work towards a joint position but that it seemed to me that there remained two important areas for discussion. First the way in which the Review was presented. I made it clear that we did not object to the idea of periodic reviews, but that we did not think it necessary or desirable to signal so clearly in the text the "communications cord" dimension. That was there anyway through the operation of the sufficient consensus rule. Why spell it out in lights in a way that presumed problems? Second we continued to believe that the call on decommissioning was too political an issue to be made by the Chair. Murphy did not enter into discussion on the details beyond commenting that he found the papers somewhat "theoretical", but he felt that the differences were not such that they could not be overcome in the next few days. He stressed the urgency of agreement and the need to table proposals quickly.

I noted that Trimble had held his fire on the decommissioning issue at the resumption of the talks. Murphy said that they had noted this too but were unclear how to read it. Trimble was still somewhat of an enigma, but his role was crucial. Murphy hoped that with the election behind him and an increase in seats at Westminster Trimble would now have the confidence to do the deal

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and to adopt a more conciliatory position on decommissioning.

Murphy commented that Trimble seemed to think that Labour's policy on Wales and Scotland could be adapted to Northern Ireland. He himself did not share this view and did not think that an approach along these lines was possible. Northern Ireland was different and the problems of a bitterly polarised society made it so. People did not kill one another in Wales on constitutional matters. I agreed noting that the three-stranded approach was designed specifically to meet the unique requirement of Northern Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations.

Sinn Féin

I stressed the importance of the decommissioning issue for Sinn Féin. They would not want to enter talks that were booby-trapped. At the same time we were encouraged by what the Secretary of State had said at Malahide on the question of back-loading any decommissioning. That, plus the narrowing of differences on the approach to handling the issue within the talks, offered some hope. We were concerned however at the tougher line taken by Sinn Féin in the last meeting with British officials, at the discovery of an IRA bomb over the weekend, and the prospects for the marching season. Murphy shared these concerns but found it difficult to read the Republican Movement's strategy. He commented that when he was in the Shadow team on Northern Ireland in 1994 he had met Sinn Féin on several occasions and had found himself in sympathy with their approach to many economic and social issues many issues. But they were blinkered on the constitutional question. Did we think that the leadership had room for manoeuvre? I thought that Adams and McGuinness saw clearly enough the compromises that they would have to face in any negotiations. But until those negotiations got under way it would be difficult to judge how far Sinn Féin would be prepared to go. What the Irish Government could not accept, no more than the British, was a twin-track strategy - talking peace but threatening war. I was sure that in any new contacts at official level we would be making this clear.

Northern Ireland Elections

Murphy was concerned at the increase in support for Sinn Féin at the expense of the SDLP in the recent elections. What did this signify for the mood of the

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nationalist population? And how much of Sinn Féin's success was based on fraudulent voting? He had no clear answers himself but he did feel that Sinn Féin had shown a considerable capacity for constituency organisation and electoral effectiveness. The British side were looking into the question of fraud and how to overcome it. In this connection he mentioned the possibility of photographic identification or identification based on social security numbers. There was some pressure in the Labour Party to organise in Northern Ireland but they had to take account of the fact that the SDLP was a sister party and sat with them in the House of Commons. The problem was that a non-nationalist Labour supporter could not bring himself to vote for the SDLP and was compelled to vote for one of the Unionist Parties. Murphy felt that there would be a significant group of unionist (with a small "u") voters who would vote for the Labour Party if this option were available to them. (Murphy raised this issue without prompting and it is clearly something that we will need to watch even if there is no intention on the part of the Labour Party to take action on it).

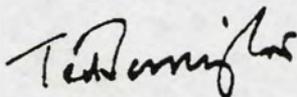
Parades

At several points in the conversation Murphy voiced his fears at the potential impact of parades on the talks process. As a Catholic he said he could recognise but not fully understand the emotions that the issue aroused amongst the Protestant community; as a Welshman he could recognise but not fully understand the corresponding emotions that it evoked on the Nationalist side. He was encouraged by the letter written by the Orange Order to the residents on the Garvaghy Road and hoped that moderation would win out. But, perhaps because this is more a matter for Ingram, he did not develop the issue further

Visit to Dublin

Murphy said that he would like to visit Dublin at an early stage for discussions with Ministers on all these issues and that dates to propose to us were under consideration in his office. I did not form the impression that he intended to come before the reconvening of the Dáil.

Yours sincerely



Ted Barrington
Ambassador