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From the Principal Private Secretary

Desk Immediate

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- cc PS/S&S/L+13)
- PS/ Mr Murphy (L+13)
- PS/ Mr Ingham (L+13)
- PS/ PUS/L+13)
- PS/ Mr Searle

- Mr Mathews
- * Mr Jeffrey
- Mr Stephens
- Mr Leach
- Mr Hill
- Mr Macaul
- Mr Brooke

Dec Mich,

PRESIDENT CLINTON'S VISIT: MEETING WITH TRIMBLE AND MALLON

Immediately after the President's arrival at Stormont, he and the Prime Minister had a twenty minute meeting with Trimble and Mallon. Dr. Mowlam, Sandy Berger, Jim Steinberg, Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell and a small number of other officials were also there.

* for urgent replies
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The Prime Minister began by saying that he thought we were making progress this week. Trimble agreed that things were moving. The appointment of McGuinness was a significant step, and more important than any number of words. He was encouraged by it. Clinton said McGuinness would be seen as a serious person in this context. The Prime Minister said the important thing was that the Agreement went ahead in all its aspects, including decommissioning of all paramilitary weapons in two years. There had also been progress on equality, and in the security situation. He thought the mood, post-Omagh, was right for this progress.

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Mallon said that it had been a traumatic summer in Northern Ireland, with the events of Drumcree, followed by the Ballymoney tragedy. Then there had been the shattering tragedy of Omagh. But two things had come out of Omagh. First, an absolute determination that this should never happen again. He saw it as a watershed. Violence would simply not be tolerated by the community any longer. Second, Omagh had focussed people on the choice to be made between violence and the political process. He and Trimble had received one constant message since Omagh: get on with the political process, and quickly. This meant everyone had to work together to break the cycle of violence.

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Clinton asked about the Assembly itself. Trimble said that there was a relatively short period for the transition, with a huge amount to be done. The Northern Ireland Bill itself was still not through Parliament, Standing Orders for the Assembly had to be sorted out, and he and Seamus Mallon had to sort out all the other structures. Nevertheless, with a fair wind the February deadline could be met. There would be problems, but it could be done.

Clinton asked what he could do to help. Trimble said that the change of atmosphere after Omagh had helped Sinn Fein to take necessary steps. There had been two important moves this week. But a lot more was needed. Clinton said he understood, and was doing his best. He now knew a lot about what decommissioning signified. The Prime Minister said that he saw Unionist opinion as having accepted that the constitutional issue was settled. But they needed confidence, not least in the face of prisoner releases, that people had really given up violence for good. He thought Sinn Fein did want to give up violence, and they also needed confidence that the equality agenda would be properly pursued. But it was the Unionists above all that needed the basic confidence to move forward. Trimble commented that Unionists approached Sinn Fein with great scepticism, and some people would take years to convince that they were sincere. Nevertheless, the majority wanted to go forward, and he was confident that things were improving.

Mallon said that two hurdles had been crossed, but there was still a lot to do. It would be extremely unwise to allow any sense of inertia to develop, otherwise people would go back to their traditional attitudes and complaints. He and Trimble had to provide a driving force, but they also needed to get structures in place so that the burden could be shared with others. Nothing would do more to settle tensions within communities than a sense that problems were being tackled together.

Clinton said that he would be referring in his speech later that morning to significant steps to keep the process moving. There was also a need to start to tackle the prosaic issues of the day, and involve wider circles in this. The process had to go on in a step by step fashion. He thought the best thing was for the US to keep working closely with the UK and Irish Governments, not least to press Sinn Fein on the arms question.

The Prime Minister said that the three Governments were working very closely now. Sinn Fein needed to understand that, if they could just start

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decommissioning, all sorts of things they wanted could begin to happen, for example demilitarisation. He was keen to see this himself. It was also important that all US voices continued to support the Agreement, and that there was no sliding back to support for men of violence. We would let Clinton's officials have a note of our concerns about people like Galvin. The fact that the British and Irish Parliaments had met on the same day to enact anti-terrorist measures symbolised that the men of violence were complete outcasts. Finally, the economic agenda was very important too.

Clinton said that the Administration would take action to isolate any Americans who were not supporting the right message, and prevent fundraising. Steinberg pointed out that Congressman King had already publicly criticised Galvin.

Clinton went on that Northern Ireland could send a very important message to the world that violence and terrorism could be successfully overcome. Mallon agreed. If Governments and communities could be bound together, Northern Ireland could demonstrate that real problems could be solved. But the problems could not be solved in a piecemeal fashion. Rather it had to be done with a shared vision and a singleness of purpose in the community. The fact that he had posed with Trimble on the steps of Stormont showed how far things had come. His father would have been horrified. But the nitty gritty business of administration had to be pursued rapidly.

Dr Mowlam said that the most effective pressure on Sinn Fein would be private rather than public. On the security side we would do what we could, but she was encouraged both that RUC and Garda relations were so good, and that the Nationalist community in Omagh had reacted so well to the RUC post-Omagh.

Trimble returned to decommissioning and the essential need for Sinn Fein to take the next step. This could transform the situation. Clinton asked when he would meet Adams. Trimble said that it would be next week.

The meeting concluded with agreement that the forthcoming tour of North American cities to promote inward investment would be important and valuable. Dr Mowlam said she also wanted to ensure that there was a flow of good economic stories locally, to show that the peace process had actual dividends.

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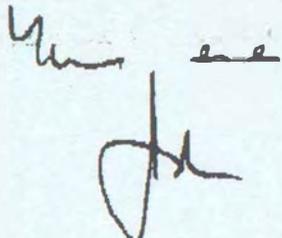
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Comment

This seemed to be a useful meeting, although there was still a visible lack of unity of approach between Trimble and Mallon. I would be grateful for a rapid note about Galvin and any other problems on the US side to send to Sandy Berger.

I am copying this to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Sebastian Wood (Cabinet Office), Sir Christopher Meyer (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).


JOHN HOLMES

Nick Perry Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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