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**Confidential**

**Meeting with John Steele**
**23 June 1997**

Dr. Drumcree
cc Parades.

1. John Steele came to the Secretariat for a briefing on parades. He focussed on the Secretary of State's current round of meetings with the Loyal Orders and the residents' groups and the prospects for agreement at Drumcree. John Fisher and Joanne Maxwell from the Secretariat were also present.

2. Present on the Irish side were David Donoghue, Kieran Dowling and the undersigned.

**Summary**

3. - The key points made in relation to Drumcree have already been reported by the Joint Secretary. In particular, Steele gave an oblique signal about the possibility of the Secretary of State inviting the two sides to proximity talks at the end of this week.

- He provided us with an account of the parade in Bellaghy last Sunday. While welcoming the fact that no violence had resulted from the decision to reroute the parade, he cautioned against a belief that Orangemen would be as compliant at Drumcree.

- He agreed that the decision to suspend Saturday evening mass at Harryville until September had been an act of statesmanship. He said it represented a genuine attempt to help ease tensions over the coming months.

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**Detail**

**Drumcree**

4. Donoghue began by asking if the Secretary of State's current round of meetings with the Loyal Orders and the various residents' groups was now complete or whether she intended holding further meetings during the week. In reply, Steele reported that earlier that day, she had been in Derry to meet the Bogside Residents' Group. She had met the Orange Order's Portadown Lodge and the Grand Lodge on several occasions and had visited the Garvaghy Road Residents' Coalition twice. However, her schedule was very tight for the remainder of the week. While it was possible that she may have further contact with relevant organisations, Steele indicated that he would represent her at any meeting she was unable to attend.

5. Donoghue asked if, even at this late stage, there was any prospect for agreement at Drumcree. Could the British detect any crumb of hope? While indicating that an accommodation at Drumcree was as far away as ever, Steele said that some slight comfort could be drawn from assurances given by both sides that they would protest peacefully against a decision of which they disapproved. However, he expressed scepticism at the prospect of these assurances being adhered to in practice.

6. In reply to Donoghue, Steele hinted at a degree of NIO involvement in the recent joint editorials by the Irish News and the Newsletter, though the idea itself had been the newspapers' own initiative. The Orange Order's letter to the residents of the Garvaghy Road had also, he suggested, come about under pressure of the NIO's repeated calls for compromise.

7. Steele considered that the prospect of direct dialogue between the Orange Order and the residents was now very remote. Various initiatives (those of Hume/Trimble and the Archbishops) had yielded no rewards. Efforts by the Chief Constable had also come to nothing.

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8. Noting media speculation that a decision on the Drumcree parade, whether by the Secretary of State or the Chief Constable, would be made and communicated well in advance of 6 July, Donoghue asked when an announcement might be expected. In reply, Steele stated that a decision on the parade's route (or indeed whether or not it should proceed at all) had not yet been taken. The Secretary of State's preference was to make the announcement early next week. This would enable the public to "digest" the decision and give the relevant authorities time to mount a "marketing exercise" on its behalf. However, if the decision was to be one for the Chief Constable, the latter would probably prefer to wait until 3 or 4 July before deciding, in order to allow time for any-last minute initiatives to succeed.

9. Donoghue recalled that, at a previous meeting, Steele had hinted that the Secretary of State might be willing, as a last resort, to bring both sides together under her auspices in some format to be defined. Was this option now under active consideration?

10. Steele replied that consideration was currently being given to the idea of bringing the Orange Order and the Garvaghy Road Residents' Coalition together for "proximity talks", where the Secretary of State would act as facilitator between the two sides. Contrary to his earlier fears (voiced to us at a recent briefing) that a last minute intervention by the Secretary of State would constitute an enormous political risk for her, he maintained that, if she decided to opt for the proximity talks, she would be in a "no lose" situation. Either an agreement would be successfully brokered or she would be seen to have tirelessly explored every possible avenue.

The Loyal Orders and the residents' groups had been impressed by Dr Mowlam during her round of contacts. As a result, she was now regarded as a major player. Any side that refused to come to the proximity talks would "lose everything" and would be seen to have been inflexible and intransigent. However, a decision on whether or not to proceed with the proximity talks initiative had yet to be taken.

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11. Steele stressed the need to keep the proposal secret. If any hint of such an initiative leaked into the public domain, all other attempts to broker agreement would immediately seize up.

12. In reply to Donoghue, Steele emphasised that the Secretary of State's role would be confined to that of facilitator and that she would not be presenting proposals of her own. However, the dynamics of the discussions could dictate that she adopt a more proactive role.

13. Donoghue asked if there was any validity in media speculation that the Orange Order might be allowed to march up, rather than down, Garvaghy Road. In response, Steele hypothesised that, by prior agreement and without police support, there could be a proposal by the Orangemen to march up Garvaghy Road in the early morning. This would be met by a peaceful protest on the part of the residents. Following a ritualised stand-off, the residents would move back, thereby offering ritualised consent, and the march would proceed. Following the church service, the Orangemen would return home along the route normally used for the outward journey. Steele, while recognising that such an approach was unlikely to be acceptable to either side, argued that its merit lay in the respect it accorded to both sides' particular concerns.

14. Steele emphasised that compromise proposals would only work if they emanated from the local people (whether Orangemen or residents). The key was to find an arrangement which enabled both sides to walk away with the feeling that their particular concerns and rights had been respected.

15. Donoghue asked whether the RUC intended to prevent a build up of Orangemen around Drumcree and, in this regard, what role was envisaged for the Army. Steele confirmed informally the existence of contingency plans to install "a ring of steel", probably manned by the Army, around Portadown several days in advance of 6 July. This would help ensure that only local Orangemen were in the vicinity of Drumcree on the day of the march.

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16. Donoghue noted recent speculation that, with the area sealed off in this way, the RUC might decide to force a limited parade down the Garvaghy Road. He cautioned strongly against such an approach, pointing to the disastrous consequences of any outcome which used coercion to assert Orange interests over those of the local residents. An imposed march on Garvaghy Road would be regarded by nationalists as "Drumcree Three".

17. In response, Steele argued that any imposed outcome held the potential for disastrous consequences. Hence the Secretary of State's efforts to identify a "middle way" acceptable to both sides. Any outcome which did not "put Orange feet on the Garvaghy Road" would be considered disastrous by the Orangemen. The real disaster would be if another breakdown in law and order occurred. Clearly, this could best be avoided if a compromise, supported across both communities, could be agreed.

18. Donoghue suggested that the newspapers' proposal for a parade down Garvaghy Road one year and none the next was an example of a middle way. In reply, Steele said that such an approach had not yet been excluded. One variation on this proposal, he suggested, would be for the Orangemen to march down Garvaghy Road this year in return for a promise to negotiate with the residents on future arrangements after July. This approach, Donoghue maintained, would be totally unacceptable to the residents as they would have no guarantees that such negotiation would take place or that the Orangemen would prove more open to compromise.

19. Steele said that he was simply teasing out various hypotheses. Both sides were highly intransigent and, consequently, dangerous. Repeating an earlier point, he stressed that the key to avoiding a repeat of last year, or worse, was to find an agreement which respected both sides' concerns and viewpoints.

20. Steele praised Rev William Bingham and Denis Watson for their attempts to avoid a repeat of last year. They had shown a genuine desire to understand and accommodate

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the residents' fears. Donoghue said it was a pity that they had not reached the point where they felt able to engage in direct dialogue with the residents' representatives.

21. Noting recent comments by the Chief Constable that the next few days would help him to assess whether he should use his own powers under Article 4 or recommend that the Secretary of State use her power under Article 5 (i.e. the power to ban), Donoghue asked what the current view in the NIO on the matter was. Steele said that the Secretary of State recognised that she had an overriding responsibility for the decision on Drumcree. In the event of the Chief Constable making the decision within his own powers under Article 4, Dr Mowlam would want to be associated with it, "if possible". Equally, if the RUC recommended that she exercise her power under Article 5, she would, if she agreed with the recommendation, be prepared to do so.

22. Donoghue asked how far the use of Article 5 was up the list of options being considered by the NIO. Steele replied that a list of options did not exist. The NIO was engaged in a process of listening and of trying to push the two sides towards an accommodation.

**Bellaghy**

23. Donoghue welcomed the fact that the Orange parade in Bellaghy the previous day had passed off peacefully. The RUC's decision to re-route the parade had worked well. Steele commented that the decision had been successful in that there was no violence, no side entirely got their own way and none of the security forces were injured. However, in order to achieve this, five hundred policemen had been required. There were reports that the marchers, having handed over letters of protest to the RUC, had commented, while turning away, that just because they had walked away in Bellaghy did not mean that they would do so at Drumcree.

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24. Steele reported that, when the Secretary of State had met Ian Paisley earlier in the day, he had complained that the RUC did not seem prepared to enforce the rights of the Protestant people. He had maintained that Sinn Féin regularly organise marches through the main street in Bellaghy without seeking the residents' consent, despite the fact, he claimed, that 50% of its residents were Protestants. Paisley had argued that when it came to Protestant marches, nationalist consent became imperative.

25. Dowling expressed concern at reports that a heavy RUC presence had remained in the area long after the parade had concluded. Some residents might have regarded this as provocative an disturbances could have resulted. Steele pointed out that most police forces regard their presence in tense situations as a calming influence. In Bellaghy, there had been a fear that disturbances might have flared between the residents and the Orangemen in the aftermath of the parade and hence it was decided to maintain a police presence well into the evening.

**Harryville**

26. Donoghue paid tribute to the decision to cancel Saturday evening mass at Harryville for July and August. It was a responsible act which, though intrinsically regrettable, would at least remove one potentially dangerous flashpoint during the marching season. Describing the decision as an act of statesmanship, Steele also regretted that circumstances had made it necessary.

27. Donoghue suggested that the decision to cancel mass had presumably stemmed from fears that the RUC would not be able to guarantee the safety of those attending mass during the marching season. Steele, denying any suggestion that the RUC had pressurised the parish priest into cancelling Saturday mass, maintained that the

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decision had been taken out of a genuine desire to decrease tension during the next two months.

JH

Joe Hackett

24 June 1997

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