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29 January, 1997.

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

Dear Sean,

Trimble's Meeting with the FCO on President's Visits to Northern Ireland

The UUP leader, David Trimble met officials of the FCO yesterday afternoon to discuss the President's visits to Northern Ireland. As already reported the meeting was requested by Trimble last week who asked that it take place at official level. Trimble, who was accompanied by Willie Ross, met Donald Lamont, the Head of the Republic of Ireland Department, and Robin Gorham of the Protocol Department. I have received an account of the meeting, which lasted for about an hour, from Lamont.

Lamont began by saying that it was a "remarkably affable" encounter. The two UUP representatives were in good humour and Trimble was "calm, cheery and in statesmanlike mood". He was clearly relieved that Trimble had not lived up to his reputation for being prickly and aggressive with British officials.

Trimble, recalling a similar meeting at the FCO about two years ago, said that it was worth reviewing the matter from time to time. The UUP felt that the President's visits to Northern Ireland had to be looked at in the light of "the Republic's territorial claim" and that the frequency of such visits was a matter of concern to the unionist population. Moreover there were specific concerns

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about events that were marked with a plaque or inscription that referred to the President as the "President of Ireland". This was seen, particularly by Ross, as a deliberate assertion of the constitutional claim. They also voiced some concerns about the type of visit, distinguishing between visits to social and cultural centres, which apparently did not cause problems, and those concerned with trade union or "equal opportunities" matters which they deemed to be "political" in character.

The FCO side responded that the President's visits had been carried out in accordance with agreed procedures and protocol. They pointed out that Britain was visited regularly by Heads of State on non-official business (i.e. private or quasi-private but with some public content) and supplied the UUP representatives with a list. According to Lamont Trimble and Ross were impressed with this and had not realised the volume of such activity. They nonetheless pointed out that Northern Ireland was in a different category and that visits by the Irish President to the area were of a different quality and of a more sensitive nature than that of a Head of State to London. Lamont commented that the UUP delegates did not appear to have any problem with the President's visits to Britain. The FCO officials described the various types of visit - State, Guest of Government, private etc - and outlined the agreement reached last year on the designation of the President for public announcements in connection with her official visit. On the constitutional point the FCO said that they did not perceive the President's visits or activities in Britain or Northern Ireland as having constitutional implications and that if the issue arose they believed that the arrangements between the two sides safeguarded their position.

Lamont thought that Trimbles's heart was not in the discussion and that he had asked for it mainly to assuage fears on Ross's part. (I am personally aware of Ross's particular concerns on the constitutional question. Last year he wrote to me in connection with my invitation to him to our National Day Reception on St Patrick's Day. He assumed whenever I refer to "National" that I am applying the terms of Articles 2 and 3 of the Constitution as a designation of the National territory. Consequently he was obliged to decline the invitation). Lamont did not form the impression that Trimble wanted to make "life difficult". The UUP side had not indicated any follow up action on their part or any intention to go public on the issue. Lamont thought that the fact that Trimble had asked for an official level meeting indicated that he did not wish to make the matter a political issue. He (Lamont) had undertaken to convey the substance of the meeting to the Embassy and to pass on the UUP points without

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in any way endorsing them. Trimble had agreed to this. Lamont's hope was that the meeting would have answered any concerns on the part of the UUP and that they would hear no more of it.

I thanked Lamont for the information and noted the points he made, in particular that he was passing on the UUP concerns without endorsement.

Comment: I would not be as sanguine as Lamont about UUP intentions. They may well be building up their dossier on the matter for use at some point in the future. Moreover I am not entirely happy with Lamont's undertaking to pass on UUP concerns to us, even if this was specifically done in a low-key and informal manner and explicitly without endorsement. It may give the UUP side the unintended impression that the FCO see some merit in their argument, and it could be exploited by the UUP in the event of difficulties over some future visit, or for example, if the DUP raise the matter in the election campaign.

Yours sincerely,

Ted Barrington
Ambassador

cc PSS, Chief of Protocol

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