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12 March 1997

Not circulated.

Mr Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
HQ

Dear Secretary

In consultation with Ambassador Barrington, I have prepared the attached draft report of our meeting at the Embassy on Friday with Dr Mo Mowlam MP and her colleagues.

Yours sincerely

Philip McDonagh

Philip McDonagh
Counsellor

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Meeting with Dr Marjorie Mowlam MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, 7 March 1997

Dr Mowlam came to the Embassy for a meeting on the afternoon of Friday 7 March. She was accompanied by Paul Murphy MP and her adviser Nigel Warner. Present on our side were Ambassador Barrington, Second Secretary O hUiginn, and the undersigned.

The meeting was arranged at the initiative of Dr Mowlam, as part of her preparation for a possible change of government, and followed her earlier visit to Dublin in December and discussion with the Ambassador. At the outset she explained that the ideas she would put forward have been discussed with Tony Blair. There is "no block" on his side regarding these ideas. However, there will be further discussions with Blair either this week or next week. Labour has not yet taken decisions regarding its policy in office. Mowlam asked us to bear that in mind for the purposes of our discussion.

On our side, Mr O hUiginn explained that we were ready to exchange views but could not of course enter into obligations on the Government's behalf.

The meeting lasted three hours. The atmosphere throughout was warm and friendly. The main points of the discussion are summarised below.

The British General Election

Mowlam is confident there will be a Labour government. She does not "in her gut" expect a landslide. She shares the general assumption that the election will be on 1 May.

Prospects for an IRA ceasefire

John Hume has briefed Blair and Ashdown on his discussions with the British Government. At what level of detail was not clear from Mowlam's remarks.

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While Labour is ready to lend bipartisan support to current efforts to bring about a renewed IRA ceasefire, they are more hopeful than confident of a ceasefire before the General Election.

Consideration is being given to steps which a Labour government could take to bring about a ceasefire. One possibility is that a Labour government could use Mr Major's statement of 28 November as a basis for its own position, while adding a "fixed date". This would be in the form of a commitment to complete the process following on a ceasefire, culminating in an invitation to Sinn Fein to enter the talks, within four weeks. Mowlam and her colleagues recognised that a delay of four weeks could be seen as artificial and as not offering any real opportunity to probe republican intentions. Given, however, the course of public debate up to now, including the Labour Party's own emphasis on "words and deeds", a four week period in which to monitor IRA activity after a ceasefire is the minimum that is politically sustainable.

For our part, we did not discourage this line of thinking. Mr O hUiginn was asked by the Labour side for an assessment of republican thinking. He observed that Adams is perhaps in a less dominant position in the republican movement than he has been in the past. We could in no sense guarantee that a particular approach by a Labour government would be successful. But many republicans have made a pragmatic analysis that violence and politics do not mix and that the best chance of advancing their objectives is in a political process. If there is to be a four week delay before Sinn Fein enters the negotiations, it would be important to emphasise the good use to which this period could be put and to avoid a presentation which would be unnecessarily pejorative from Sinn Fein's point of view.

Mowlam and her colleagues remarked that ideally they would want Sinn Fein to enter the negotiations as of 3 June. But in the nature of things, a Labour initiative and a republican response might occupy the first few weeks of Labour's period in office. The four-week entry process would last in all probability until mid-June at the earliest. Despite this inconvenience, it would for obvious reasons be impossible to decide on a Labour initiative in advance of the General Election.

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Unionist reaction to an IRA ceasefire

Our visitors were anxious to explore the likely Unionist reaction to an IRA ceasefire. First of all, would the predictable refusal of Unionists to sit around the table with Sinn Fein vitiate the "meaningful negotiations" which in the eyes of the republican movement are the first condition for a ceasefire?

Our response was to the effect that republicans are focused mainly on the position of the British Government. The Unionist position would not in itself be likely to be an obstacle to a ceasefire.

Our visitors speculated that the UUP would not walk out of the talks but would instead refuse to enter substantive negotiations with Sinn Fein. Initially at least, they would hold to their position on decommissioning as set out during the autumn.

Mowlam indicated, without being specific, that she is not disposed to give ground to the Unionists on decommissioning. [An article by Donald McIntyre in today's London Independent gives a very similar impression of Labour thinking.]

In this situation, a prolonged stand-off could be expected at Stormont. Mowlam pointed out that this could be a difficult period for the Labour Party. If a special effort had been made to bring Sinn Fein into the talks, only the Guardian and the Independent among the printed media would be likely to be supportive. Bipartisanship at Westminster might collapse. The inevitable focus on other policy issues in the early days of a Labour government would, however, offer some protection.

Moving the talks forward

Mowlam readily agreed that if the talks are to make progress under these difficult circumstances, it is essential that the two governments work closely together.

An idea which interested her was that the two governments, by intensifying their own cooperation, for example on Strand Three issues or a Bill of Rights, could create an incentive for the UUP to enter substantive negotiations.

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At one point Mowlam mentioned that if the stand-off in the talks continues until the summer break, "we and the Irish" can get together with a view to pushing things forward in September.

In the course of this discussion, Paul Murphy made the point that the sufficient consensus rule ultimately requires Unionist support for an agreement.

Parades

Mowlam mentioned her support for the North Report. She indicated that she is considering legislating by the rapid procedure of statutory instrument to give the Parades Commission determining powers in advance of Drumcree.

Reassuring the Unionists

Mowlam and Murphy advanced the argument that Labour policy is such that in June and July the Unionist community may be in need of specific reassurance. Mowlam drew an analogy with Sinn Fein. Just as she is willing to accept that their "psychology" makes prior decommissioning impossible, she feels there is a Unionist "psychology" which should be recognised by the British Government. Murphy accepted that there is a strategic sense in which inclusive negotiations on the basis of the Framework Document are in the best interests of the Unionist community. On the other hand, there is the shorter term issue of how the Unionists will respond to the entry of Sinn Fein into negotiations and other aspects of Labour policy. Some specific confidence-building measures vis-a-vis the Unionist community seem called for.

We did not challenge the spirit of Mowlam's and Murphy's thinking but pointed out that some of the measures which Unionists would see as reassuring could be seen by Nationalists as prejudicial to the long-term strategy shared by the two governments.

The Labour side spoke at first in general terms of the gestures they might have in mind. Murphy mentioned a possible "speech by the Taoiseach". Mowlam made a distinction between Unionist parties and the Unionist community. She

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mentioned in passing that improvements in the operations of the Life Sentence Review Board might have an impact on a limited section of Unionist opinion. She also mentioned that many Unionists have a false picture of the impact and significance of Maryfield.

Mowlam then wondered aloud whether it would be reassuring to Unionists if the projected life-span of a future agreement could be defined. She mentioned a period of 30 years. Ambassador Barrington pointed out that this proposal could lead to a contentious debate and take the focus off the principle of consent; although intended to reassure it could have an opposite and destabilising effect.

Mowlam raised the possibility of offering something to the Unionists in the sphere of local government. She suggested that the document "Pathways to Peace" is essentially a Unionist shopping list for a new Labour government. Murphy said that an initiative could fall short of a complete reform of local government such as has been conducted in Scotland and Wales.

Mr O hUiginn pointed to the obvious sensitivity of local government for the Nationalist community. The impression should not be given that a Labour government might be ready to "manage" the situation in Northern Ireland instead of working towards a balanced settlement. This said, we were aware of the arguments for allowing power-sharing councils a wider margin of discretion.

Other issues

Mowlam said that she already has the agreement of Jack Straw to speed up the transfer of prisoners.

A Labour government would move forward on Bloody Sunday.

Consideration is being given to early announcements on Labour objectives in the areas of policing, fair employment and PAFT, and the EPA. There have been discussions with Ann Taylor on public appointments.

Mowlam wondered whether there is scope for further development of the East/West dimension. She mentioned the British Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body. We referred to the Taoiseach's interest in this subject and to the balance

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to be preserved as between East/West and North/South cooperation. We agreed to provide Mowlam with some further details.

Early contacts with the Irish Government

Mowlam said there should be early contact with the Irish Government after the General Election and an early IGC. She would welcome a call by the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste on Blair and herself and was confident that Blair would welcome this, even in his first week in office.

Philip McDonagh
Counsellor

11 March 1997

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