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AMBASÁID NA HÉIREANN, LONDAIN

IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

17, GROSVENOR PLACE, SW1X 7HR
Telephone: 0171-235 2171
Direct Line: 0171-201 2
Fax: 0171-245 6961

P21

11 October 1999

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin 2

Dear Secretary,

Appointment of Peter Mandelson as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

The New Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Mandelson, is one of the most controversial and colourful members of the Labour Party. A close friend of Tony Blair he is credited with orchestrating Blair's campaign for leadership of the Labour Party in July 1994 and subsequently with devising new Labour's strategy for the General Election. He entered Government as Minister without Portfolio at the Cabinet Office, immediately after the election, and in July 1998 he was promoted as Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. His rise through the ranks to one of the higher offices of Government was predicted, but he was forced to resign as Secretary of State and to leave the Cabinet just before Christmas last year, over a secret home loan from Geoffrey Robinson, the Paymaster General.

Since then the main focus of speculation has been about when Blair would feel it right to bring him back. There has never been any serious question about *if* Mandelson should return to Cabinet; the question has been when he would be seen to have paid his dues and when the Prime Minister could feel comfortable in restoring him to office. Many commentators feel that Blair has missed

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Mandelson's political skills in Cabinet, but a number also argue that the period since his departure from Government has been marked by fewer internecine troubles within the Cabinet. I think both observations are true. Mandelson's return will bring back a modernising edge to the Government which has been missing over the past year, will strengthen the pro-European forces in Government in a period when the Government is attempting to promote a more pro-European view, and will strengthen also the Blair's hand in his dealings with Gordon Brown, whose weight in Cabinet and whose standing in the country has increased significantly over the past year. Brown's speech to the Labour Party Conference two weeks ago was seen as a weighty and calculated contribution in contrast to the Prime Minister's which was seen as synthetic and insubstantial. For this reason, and because of old enmities relating to the party leadership, it could be expected that Mandelson's return will not be welcomed by the Brown team; nor will it be welcomed by old Labour who hold him up as the person most responsible for Labour's losing its soul.

Peter Mandelson is a substantial figure. He has a fine political brain, a strategic sense of where Labour should go in British political life, and an instinct for policy. He comes to office with significant background in the Labour Party. His grandfather was Herbert Morrison, a Minister in the post war Attlee Government, and he himself has spent much of his working life within the Party or in close association with it. After Oxford (where he studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics) he worked for the TUC and he served on Lambeth Council from 1979 to 1982. He worked on London Weekend Television (on *The London Programme* and *Weekend World*) from 1982 to 1985 when he became Director of Campaigns and Communications for the Labour Party. He was elected MP for the Hartlepool constituency in the 1992 election and was subsequently appointed a whip and Opposition Spokesman for the Civil Service.

But it is for his close working relationship with Tony Blair and his direction of Labour's political and policy renewal that he is best known. In 1996 he published, with Roger Liddle, *The Blair Revolution*, a book that outlines many of his ideas for the modernisation of the Party and Britain. Interestingly, but not really surprisingly, the book makes almost no reference to Northern Ireland and does not include the issue as one of the key areas for the new politics. But remember that Blair too before his election was regarded as someone who was ill informed on Northern Ireland and as someone who would not take an interest in the North as Prime Minister. This was an incorrect reading of Blair, as we reported at the time. You will recall that privately, before the election, he said to

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me that he would give it priority and that "he would make a difference". It must be said that Mandelson has not shown a similar policy interest and where Northern Ireland is mentioned in *The Blair Revolution*, and then only briefly, it is in the context of his argument in support of devolution for Scotland and Wales.

Some of the commentary on Mandelson suggests that he is closer to the Unionist than to the Nationalist position. This was in part prompted by Trimble's suggestion at an off the record briefing early in the Summer that Mandelson would be a good replacement for Mo Mowlam and on the supposition that if Trimble was calling for his appointment then he must be seen as a strong supporter. I can see no strong evidence for this view and he has not shown it, or chosen to reveal it, in my own conversations with him. He has told me himself that he got to know Northern Ireland through his work with London Weekend Television, when Weekend World often covered events there. He claims to have made many friends in Northern Ireland at that time, but the only one of prominence that I am aware of is Mary Holland, who has written positively about him and his coverage of that stage of the Troubles. I have no record of significant public pronouncements or speeches by him on the issue. I do not have the impression that he is someone with strong personal views or prejudices, or that he will bring a personal agenda to the issue.

As a Blairite he will be a strong supporter of the Good Friday Agreement and we can expect that he will work closely with Blair to achieve its implementation. In this respect I imagine things will be different from the past eighteen months or so where it was clear that Blair had lost confidence in Mowlam's abilities and felt that he had to take on too much of the burden himself. We could expect Mandelson to take on more of the key work with the parties. Jonathan Powell said to me at the Labour Conference that Blair would have to judge very carefully how and when he reinserted himself back into the process after the Mitchell review, and I detected a reluctance, at least on Powell's part, to bring the Prime Minister back centre stage unless it was absolutely necessary. At the same time we should note that Mandelson is not one of the architects of the Good Friday Agreement and may be willing to look at it in a more flexible way. I would expect him, for example, to be sensitive to the feedback from British public opinion on the question of prisoner releases and we might see a toughening of rhetoric here. He will also be conscious of the perception that Mowlam's personal inclinations were to the Nationalist side and is likely to want to project a more neutral image.

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I think that Mandelson will find it difficult to resist involvement in wider Cabinet and Party issues, particularly as Labour approaches the next election, and it must be part of Blair's strategy to use the Northern Ireland job as a prelude to a more senior role. But in the meantime Mandelson must prove himself in the Cabinet. His overriding aim will be to achieve a success after the difficulties of the last eighteen months (a success that coincidentally would reduce the importance of the Northern Ireland job) and to demonstrate that he is a heavyweight politician with a capacity to deliver. He did not really have time to make his mark at Trade and Industry but Civil Servants who worked with him speak highly of him and had high expectations for his period there.

Given his closeness to Blair, his weight in the Labour Party, and the role that he is likely to play I feel that we should move fairly quickly for a meeting at Ministerial level.

Yours sincerely,

Edward Barrington
Ambassador

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NORTHERN IRELAND

Information Service

The Rt Hon Peter Mandelson MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Rt. Hon Peter Mandelson MP was appointed Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 11th October 1999.

He was elected as Member of Parliament for Hartlepool in 1992.

From July 1998 until December 1998 he was Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and was previously Minister without Portfolio in the Cabinet Office, from May 1997 until July 1998.

Previous to his ministerial appointments Mr Mandelson had been the Labour Party's Election Campaign Manager, from January 1996. He was appointed an Oppostition whip in October 1994 and became Shadow Civil Service spokesman in October 1995. He stood down from this post in July 1996 to focus full-time on the Labour Party's Election Campaign, while remaining on the Opposition front bench.

Mr Mandelson studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics at St Catherine's College Oxford. He was a television producer on LWT's Weekend World, before being appointed Labour Party Director for Campaigns and Communications in 1985. He remained in this post until he was selected as the Labour candidate for Hartlepool in 1990. In February 1996 he wrote The Blair Revolution with Roger Liddle.

His hobbies include walking, travel and reading.

Assisting the Secretary of State at the Northern Ireland Office are:

Minister of State Adam Ingram MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary John McFall MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary Lord Dubs
Parliamentary Under Secretary George Howarth MP

October 1999

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