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CONFIDENTIAL

22 July 1999

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

Dear Secretary,

Conversation with Jonathan Powell

Jonathan Powell, who had been unable to attend my farewell reception on Tuesday, suggested meeting yesterday evening. For him it was a busy time. In addition to his heavy schedule as Chief of Staff to the Prime Minister, Powell is moving house tomorrow, Friday, with two daughters under the age of two, and from today, Thursday, will be looking after his two sons by his first marriage who are coming over from America for the summer.

Mo Mowlam

Powell spoke warmly of Mo Mowlam and her husband and stated clearly that the "briefing against her" is not coming from Downing Street. The hostile comment, he said, has been hard for Mo, harder than the public might think. But "she'll get over it". (There was no hint that Mo will move in the reshuffle. If anything, Powell's "body language" was to the effect that she may stay on in Northern Ireland.)

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The June-July deadlines

Powell said that commentators have been asking the wrong questions about recent events in Northern Ireland. The real story is not the failure to respect deadlines, but the absence of an explosion of violence during the marching season. There has been a change of mood in both communities that makes it harder than ever before for violence to resume. Powell compared the critics' misreading of July 1999, as he sees it, with their misreading of summer 1998. Historians will say that 1998 was the year in which the Orange Order was finally faced down by the authorities and the police.

Prospects for the review

Powell expressed hope, even confidence, about future developments in Northern Ireland, but largely on the basis of underlying changes in society of the kind identified by him in 1998 and 1999. He was surprisingly clear in stating his personal opinion that a deal will not be done in September. According to Powell, the gap between the two sides is too wide to be bridged in a short time and Senator Mitchell is not the actor who will provide the key. The key will have to be provided in due course by the two governments, almost certainly at a date later than the recall of parliament at Westminster.

The terms of a deal

I asked Powell on what terms he sees the deal being made.

Powell had no simple answer. He said that at several points in recent months the UUP could have obtained a deal under which decommissioning would happen in September. Trimble personally saw this and was willing to move but was constrained by his party. Circumstances are now in some ways more difficult. The supplementary British legislation will be called into question. The underlying intentions of the IRA on decommissioning are impossible to fathom. One might assume that a helpful IRA statement would be forthcoming at some point (Powell was as unaware as I was of the statement that was to issue last night). Powell recognised on the other hand that there are subtleties in the IRA-Sinn Fein relationship. The personalities in the IRA and Sinn Fein are the same; policies differ according to the configuration in which they meet. To illustrate this idea, Powell observed that in the old days the National Executive Committee of the

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Labour Party could never be relied on to produce the same policies as a Labour Cabinet!

In the mode of thinking aloud, Powell remarked that in recent weeks Unionists have once again asked him whether Ambassador Barrington might visit Northern Ireland officially to mark the North's new status in the eyes of the Irish government.

I adverted to some of the difficulties we have had with such proposals in the past (inwardly I recalled a similar suggestion from George Fergusson of the Foreign Office immediately following the Omagh bombing, also put forward as something that had been brought up by Unionists).

Clarifying his comments, Powell said that he was not suggesting that such a gesture should be attempted before the establishment of the institutions. Clearly it would not in itself deliver Unionist agreement to a package and it might upset others. But a visit by the Ambassador to the North, in circumstances that the Unionists could portray as politically significant, could in due course be a "useful card" for the Irish government.

Powell summed up the search for an accommodation as the search for a formula that neither community could present as a victory over the other. Such a formula would not be easy to find.

The Taoiseach and the Prime Minister

Powell said that a great asset in the search for an accommodation is that the Taoiseach is a "star" for whom Tony Blair has enormous respect. Next to President Clinton, the Taoiseach is the overseas leader closest to the Prime Minister.

I said that the respect is mutual. I asked Powell how he would explain the closeness to which he referred.

Powell responded that the Prime Minister regards the Taoiseach as a "fellow left of centre, pragmatic" politician, and also as someone willing to offer very courageous leadership. It could be argued, Powell said, that the Irish government is not pursuing a classic Nationalist agenda in the North but is looking primarily for a settlement that works. This echoes Tony Blair's understanding of his own

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role, which is to free himself from some of the demands of Socialist and Nationalist ideology. (I think Powell may have been implying delicately that Blair does not have a British Nationalist agenda on Northern Ireland.)

Adverting by way of comparison to my next posting, Powell said that there are signs that the Indian Government is overcoming post-colonial emotions, as the Irish Government has done. This gives enormous scope for developing the British-Indian relationship. Mr. Blair has a personal interest in India's potential as a market.

The Labour government

I asked Powell how the Labour Government would like to be remembered.

Powell said he would answer on the assumption that Labour has at least two terms of office. Ten years on, the Labour Government will be seen as the government that brought Britain into the single currency, brought some kind of peaceful future to Northern Ireland, improved public services, especially in education, introduced welfare reform and "recovered Britain's position in the world" that had been "lost under John Major".

Powell sought my reaction to these ideas. I asked whether there could be a contradiction between what is meant by a "position in the world" and the goal of European integration. It could be argued that broadly speaking the European project is about stability, whereas the projection of power requires American leadership.

Powell, with whom I have had similar discussions in the past, acknowledged a hand in the Prime Minister's Chicago speech and argued, as he has done before, that the world needs overwhelming American military power as the basis of order. Europe also needs greater military power. It is unsatisfactory that Britain can deploy forty thousand men, France seven thousand, and everyone else "zero". British ideas on defence are pro-European.

I asked Powell whether he saw a risk that an American and European emphasis on military capability might serve to revalue upwards the currency of military power and encourage others to go the same route.

Powell said that there have been "papers from the Foreign Office, clearly

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inadequate" (I thought he was implying that some of my comments echoed submissions by the Foreign Office to the British government). Powell argued that from a military point of view, there is very little danger attached to the American role: the imbalance of power in the world is hugely in America's favour. But a reasonable objective would be create conditions in which military power remains firmly in the background. For example, the day to day relations between the United States and western European governments are not influenced in any way by America's military advantage.

Port powers under the PTA

I briefed Powell informally on our exchanges with the Foreign Office over the past month regarding the gathering of information at ports under the PTA.

I pointed to the disruption that will arise if the relevant section of the Home Office insists on a requirement that ferry companies collect the name, place of birth and date of birth of each of their millions of passengers. I said that there is real concern at political level in Dublin and that the new requirements may be formally in place by 1 September, making the situation even more difficult.

Powell asked me a number of pertinent questions concerning the role of Departments and sections in Whitehall. He expressed particular surprise that additional information on passengers and crews is to be gathered only on certain routes, that is, only within the common travel area. The whole thing sounded like "bureaucracy run wild". Downing Street would have the situation looked into.

Yours sincerely,

Philip McDonagh

Philip McDonagh
Counsellor

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