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To: HQ From: Belfast
For: Secretary Gallagher From: Joint Secretary

Subj: NI Secretary of State meetings with Sinn Féin, Ulster Unionist Party and Democratic Unionist Party, 17/18 August 1999

The following read-out of the Northern Ireland Secretary of State's meetings with NI political parties on 17/18 August is based on briefings received today from the British side of the Secretariat.

Sinn Féin meeting

The hour-long meeting with Sinn Féin (Martin McGuinness and Mitchell McLoughlin), described as "a direct exchange of views", involved some blunt talking on both sides and was followed by a separate, private meeting between the Secretary of State and McGuinness. In sum, the SOS sought a commitment that there would be no more murders like that of Charles Bennett and no more attempts to procure arms. McGuinness explained (in the private session) that it was impossible to give commitments of the kind requested. The SOS also broached the question of prisoner releases.

At the outset, the SOS explained she would make her decision on the shape of the cease-fires based on information available to her on IRA activity in Northern Ireland and on the implications of the Florida arms importation case. She said that her decision would be made "early next week at the latest".

(**Comment:** on the timing issue, my interlocutor explained that the SOS does not wish to make a decision before Monday's meeting with the Minister and may want to defer a decision further if sufficiently conclusive evidence is not available - and may even decide to defer an announcement until after the Mitchell Review. It was speculated that her decision could perhaps even be "not to take a decision". Officials are also said to be concerned that a decision announcement by the SOS, which was based on evidence regarding arms procurement, could prejudice potential prosecutions. Such a decision would, moreover, be potentially subject to review in the Courts and there is an awareness that Bob McCartney, in particular, will be alive to such possibilities.)

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During the meeting, the SOS floated the idea of the IRA themselves deciding to redefine the terms of their ceasefire e.g. no killing. This would be a fresh start, she argued, which would help improve the atmosphere for the Mitchell Review. The Sinn Féin response was two-fold: McGuinness thought that such a re-definition might well offer a way forward but that he wasn't sure if it would be "a flyer". McLoughlin doubted if there was sufficient time for the idea to develop.

The Sinn Féin presentation at the meeting with the Secretary of State was blunt and direct: the peace process was in crisis brought about by Unionist intransigence and the failure of PM Tony Blair to face down the Ulster Unionists. There is widespread anger in the Nationalist community at the continued attempts to exclude Sinn Féin from the political process, they said, and there is a deep suspicion that the Parades Commission is under political influence, as recently witnessed by the outcome in relation to the Lower Ormeau Road and to Derry. (Watkins refuted this) There was little confidence among Republicans that Mitchell would be able to resolve the problem and Tony Blair was accused of abdicating his responsibility: the Unionists would move only when pushed. McGuinness also detailed at some length the series of Loyalist attacks on the Nationalist community, including ten (10) Catholic murders over the past year, the numerous pipe-bomb attacks etc. With regard specifically to Derry, Mitchell McLoughlin accused the Parades Commission of having deliberately sabotaged the ongoing negotiations on the Derry Parade by their decision on the Lower Ormeau Road parade. (Ingram rejected that, citing the Parades Commission's independence and lack of political intent.) At the same time, McLoughlin also regretted the disturbances in Derry which he said had been orchestrated by elements which had left Sinn Féin.

The Secretary of State refuted the overall Sinn Féin presentation with considerable vigour, pointing out that the British Government had run d'Hondt and that the Prime Minister personally had done all that he possibly could have done to move forward with the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

With regard to the content of her decision, the SOS explained to Sinn Féin that the Bennett murder was not the only problem - the arms procurement case had added to her difficult decision. However, she was not going to give a knee-jerk reaction - she was taking the situation very seriously. One option, she noted, could be to take action on prisoner releases. She did not wish to appear to be threatening Sinn Féin of any decision to act, before it was announced.

Comment: At a review meeting of officials earlier today, one of those involved on the British side described it (I understand) as one of the hardest he had witnessed between the SOS and Sinn Féin - very direct, positive, clear and very serious. The SOS herself had noted the salutary impact of her raising the prisoners' release option, saying that her interlocutors were "visibly shaken". She wants a commitment on future behaviour. Her

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own assessment is said to be that what she at the meeting said will have had the effect of convincing Sinn Féin of the necessity that nothing further should occur between now and the review.

UUP

By contrast, the UUP meeting appears to have been both confused and confusing, with Ken Maginnis in charge neither of his brief nor his team, who appeared generally ill-prepared. While he did set out his anxiety to keep Sinn Féin in the process so that their actions would come under "the scrutiny of the democratic process and of the Review", I gather that Maginnis did not carry with him all those on the UUP delegation. Late this evening (the 19th), I was told that a satisfactory note of the meeting had not yet been prepared but was promised a proper briefing tomorrow (Friday) morning.

DUP

The DUP meeting with the SOS - attended by Paisley, Robinson, Dodd, Poots, and Morrow - followed predictable lines, with Peter Robinson (who appears to have done most of the talking) calling on the SOS to set out clearly what constituted a ceasefire. He described the situation as having "gone beyond a joke", with guns being sent, beatings ordered and people killed. He said it was a charade to involve Sinn Féin in the Mitchell review process and indicated that the DUP generally aggrieved that the review would be taking only pro-Agreement parties on board. In response to his enquiry as to whether the Assembly would be re-convened next month, the SOS said she would be only too happy for the Assembly to make a contribution to the debate. The SOS's general response to the DUP at the meeting was simply to say that she was there to provide an opportunity for them to put their views to her - and not to be cross-questioned. In sum, no dialogue at a very one-sided meeting.

UKUP

By way of footnote, as indicated earlier, it is being assumed that McCartney is already actively working towards a possible judicial review of whatever decision the Secretary of State makes in relation to the ceasefires and Sinn Féin.

Overall Assessment

In the wake of the various preliminary contacts outlined, there appears to be a general feeling that Mitchell will not be able to solve all of the problems in the limited time available to him and that the political parties, overall, do not really seem to know where they are going. This points to the likelihood that it will once again fall to the two Governments to chart a way forward.

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