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**Meeting with Michael McGimpsey, Belfast, 19 January 1999**

1. I met McGimpsey for approximately an hour in his office at Parliament Buildings, Stormont. While he seemed tired after the drama of Monday's Assembly debate, he was in good form, and appeared pleased at how matters had unfolded. Like other members of the party, he had enjoyed the tactical wrongfooting of the DUP and of the other anti-Agreement unionists; and he appreciated Trimble's decisive leadership.

2. With regard to Peter Weir, he agreed with the leadership's decision to remove the party whip but to give him a chance to crawl back; he dismissed Duncan Shipley-Dalton, who wanted stiffer action, as "a moron". It was important psychologically that the UUP retain its slim numerical lead over the anti-Agreement side. He was heartened by the fact that Pauline Armitage and Roy Beggs jr. had obeyed the whip, but not completely convinced that their nerve would hold.

3. Looking ahead, he sketched out a scenario whereby the introduction of the Trimble/Mallon "determining" motion on 15 February would lead to a debate of up to three days. Assuming it was passed, there would then be a further procedural delay while the standing order triggering the application of the d'Hondt principle was adopted. However, the crunch would then come at the end of February/beginning of March.

4. If the UUP had not by then received satisfaction on decommissioning, they would move the exclusion of Sinn Féin. Assuming that failed, they would then not nominate candidates for office, and the Agreement would be thrown into crisis.

5. McGimpsey said he was basically optimistic, if only because he felt that, politically, none of the parties had anywhere else to go. But he candidly admitted

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that "we can't move on decommissioning, but nor can Sinn Féin. We're both going to have to blink at the same time." One side would have to know with confidence that if it did x, the other side would do y. I did not pursue with McGimpsey what "x" might be, as far as the UUP were concerned, but it seemed apparent that he was still thinking in terms of some physical act of weapons destruction. He argued (perhaps somewhat tendentiously) that while the UUP continued to make clear (for instance in John Taylor's Assembly speech on Monday) its willingness, indeed desire, to see Sinn Féin in office, republicans were giving nothing on decommissioning.

6. McGimpsey was adamant that the UUP would be hopelessly split if Trimble were to serve alongside Sinn Féin without progress on decommissioning, and drew attention to the annual meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council on 20 March. Trimble had to continue to receive the support of at least 70% for his leadership to be credible.

7. McGimpsey felt that, in the right circumstances, use could be made of the brief window which might occur between the nomination of Ministers under d'Hondt and devolution - even though the UUP up to now has not distinguished between the shadow and the full. Though he did not develop his thinking, I had the impression that he could envisage a situation in which Sinn Féin would nominate two shadow Ministers before any act on decommissioning, so long as the UUP were certain that some agreed step would occur immediately thereafter.

8. Perhaps thinking aloud, McGimpsey wondered if there were any chance that the SDLP would vote to exclude Sinn Féin if at the same time the DUP were to be excluded (on the basis that its stated intention not to participate in the North/South Ministerial Council would be a clear breach of its obligations). I said that in my view the SDLP would find it politically impossible to vote to exclude Sinn Féin

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at this stage. The position of the DUP, while important in its own right (and I acknowledged he had raised a significant question), was only an incidental complicating factor in this situation.

9. We briefly discussed likely Ministerial appointments. McGimpsey, with appropriate modesty, placed himself fifth in the UUP queue, behind Empey, Taylor, Nesbitt and Fred Cobain. He claimed there had been no open discussion of this within the party, and nor had there been any analysis of the attractions of the different Departments. However, he personally felt that Finance, given the tight Treasury constraints within which it had to work, would rank behind both Enterprise, Trade and Investment and Regional Development.

Rory Montgomery
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