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Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
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Dear Secretary,

The peace process and the British media

The prominence of the peace process in the Labour Government's agenda since 1997 and, now, the media obsession with the personality of Peter Mandelson have ensured that British media interest has not turned off at any point in recent years. However, following the drama and recriminations surrounding the suspension of the institutions, journalistic attention to events in Northern Ireland is at present in one of its periodic lulls with British journalists looking to St. Patrick's Day in Washington as the next major newsworthy event - but with a near universal assumption that the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister will have to become involved in another major effort to renew the process in advance of 22 May. For now, political journalism is fixated by what is seen as Tony Blair's most immediate, and most serious political problem, Ken Livingstone.

The Secretary of State

Peter Mandelson attracts media attention to whatever Ministerial post he holds and much of the "non-specialist" interest in the events surrounding suspension has been the result of that fascination with his political career. Mandelson has in recent weeks paid very close attention to the media, both as a producer and a consumer of news and by now the series of reports of differences of opinion with the Irish Government have probably run their course. Most journalists who have covered the process in any detail take it as a given that, while recriminations may have a short term news value, progress is crucially dependent on the closest cooperation between the two Governments. Overall, although many would cast serious doubt on some of his statements at the time, his efforts have resulted in a general view among British journalists and commentators that, in the end, he had no option but to suspend the Executive, in order to save David Trimble's position as leader of the UUP.

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Mandelson's position has been strengthened by the strong assumption that, although the Prime Minister was not to the fore during the difficulties, there can have been no question of a rift between Downing Street and the Secretary of State, who remains exceptionally close to Tony Blair on all political matters, most notably the planning for the next general election.

One of the major differences in style between Peter Mandelson and his predecessor is his constant, personal briefing of press contacts built up over the years. (He has also been active with the Irish media and apparently has a series of meetings arranged with journalists in Dublin again this Friday). Since his appointment, and especially during the difficulties of recent weeks, he has kept in close touch with a number of journalists and editorial staff, especially on the *Times*, which has adopted a much more supportive editorial line on his efforts than it did towards his predecessor. (Whether coincidental or not, Michael Gove, who is extremely uncomfortable with the peace process and the Agreement, has been moved from the position of Comment Editor to that of Home Affairs Editor). He also keeps in regular contact with Andrew Grice, Political Editor of the *Independent*, which now prides itself as having excellent, and willing, sources among both "New" and "Old" Labour Cabinet members - the Chief Political Correspondent, Colin Brown, is a confidant of John Prescott, whose biography he wrote in 1997, and who has spoken to him in recent weeks of his growing concern at what he sees as Tony Blair's Presidential style and his lack of attention to the Labour "core vote".

Mandelson was also the source for John Lloyd's article in yesterday's *Financial Times*, arguing that Unionists should look towards "the removal of decommissioning from the privileged blocking position it occupies", re-establishment of the Executive and concentration on "longer-term guarantees of ultimate (IRA) disarming". This article has apparently caused considerable comment among some Ulster Unionists, given Lloyd's reputation, as Assistant Editor of the *New Statesman*, as one of the staunchest and most open media supporters of both New Labour and David Trimble personally. (According to a number of journalists who maintain their contacts with different strands of Unionist opinion, there is also some discontent at the extent to which people such as Lloyd and Sean O'Callaghan have taken credit as advisers for many of Trimble's political moves over the past few years in Henry McDonald's just-published biography. O'Callaghan continues to brief some journalists, especially on the Sunday papers, on Trimble's thinking but has lost some credibility as a result of his predictions in January on the imminence of an IRA act of decommissioning and the establishment of sealed bunkers).

The mood in Unionism

A number of London-based British and Irish journalists retain good contacts with members of the UUP and have now begun exploring the mood of the party again. Several have mentioned to me that figures such as Michael McGimpsey, Dermot Nesbitt and Reg Empey have been talking over the past week or so of the need "to

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change the context", to find new ways of addressing the issue of disarmament with a view to re-establishing an inclusive Executive and avoiding any chance of a split in the republican movement - on the basis that support among the Unionist population in general for such a move is probably much greater than among the party membership. Some are reported to have spoken in this way at a meeting several days ago of the Party's policy committee, established by Trimble following suspension, but which also includes Jeffrey Donaldson. Several of the UUP's Westminster MP s have pointed out to journalists, however, that although they did not believe he was obliged to do so, David Trimble has given a firm commitment that he will not re-enter the Executive without the approval of the Ulster Unionist Council - and they say they are confident that that is a long way off. Other commentators suggest that the broad membership of the Assembly Party has no appetite for any change in position - and that some of the promoters of new ideas are being undermined by suggestions that their views are in part determined by a wish to resume Ministerial office. There is no great journalistic interest in the UUC annual meeting on 25 March and no expectation that a "stalking horse" candidate could repeat the success of Lee Reynolds in undermining James Molyneaux's leadership. Frank Millar is of the view that Trimble's position in the Party is unassailable, but that, for now, he would be at very real risk if he were seen to be considering changing the position on decommissioning which he has already set out in detail to the Council.

The race for Mayor of London

The only real subject of discussion among journalists in the Westminster lobby at Prime Minister's Questions today was the London Mayoral election. The search for a Labour candidate has provided them with stories of infighting and intrigue for months, most recently with the odd suggestion, apparently from within Downing Street, that consideration was still being given to drafting in Mo Mowlam to replace an "unelectable" Frank Dobson - and her response in an interview with Colin Brown in the *Independent* last week that she might have considered standing if the position had been on offer when she was moved "unwillingly" from Belfast. (The fact, of course, is that she firmly resisted the call to stand as Labour's candidate). This suggestion is now dismissed out of hand - one Guardian journalist said to me that Mowlam would be "crucified" by the electorate if the Party were so clearly seen to be motivated by panic at Dobson's poor performance in the campaign so far.

Following the near hysterical media reaction to Ken Livingstone's announcement on Monday that he would stand as an Independent, which contributed to the 55 point lead over Frank Dobson revealed in the immediate Guardian/ICM opinion poll, many journalists, on reflection, took the view that over the coming two months, the Labour machine, and his record in the 1980s would eventually defeat Livingstone. However, by today, virtually all journalists I spoke to at Westminster were of the view that he would win. One of the most respected electoral analysts in the lobby, Peter Kellner, of the *Evening Standard* and the *New Statesman*, told me that under the electoral system to be used (voters will be permitted to express a first and a second preference),

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Livingstone will win, on transfers, if he receives more than about 30% of first preference votes - regarded, at this point, as almost a certainty. Voters saw a vote for Livingstone as "cost-free" (as the Mayor will not have tax-raising powers), there was a growing mood that he deserved the job and there was no evidence of any enthusiasm for any of the other candidates. Kellner took the view that the only way Labour could defeat him was by "going nuclear" on his record, but that the risks of his winning despite such a campaign were too great for the Government to take. He felt that, at some point in the coming weeks, the Government would come to the view that Livingstone was going to win, and would begin to examine how to work with rather than against him as Mayor. The alternative would be to risk the loss of Labour seats in London at the next election - and Tony Blair's overriding aim in Government was still the achievement of Labour's historic second successive term in office.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Gaffey

cc Declan Kelly, Press Section

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