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Paddy Teahon

KMcD

Meeting between Minister for Foreign Affairs and Secretary of State

London, 9 February 2000

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1. The meeting took place in the Secretary of State's office in the NIO and lasted about 75 minutes. In addition to the two principals, those present were, on the British side, Bill Jeffrey, Jonathan Stephens, Nick Perry and Tom Kelly and, on the Irish side, Dermot Gallagher, Ted Barrington, Ray Bassett, Colm O Floinn, Declan Kelly and Rory Montgomery.

2. The **Minister** outlined developments in the ongoing contacts with Sinn Féin, emphasising the enormous potential significance of paragraph 2 of the "Draft Elements" paper. The key question was whether, if republicans could sign up to the texts as agreed by the Governments, David Trimble could also be persuaded to sell them to his party. The **Minister** also stressed the value of General de Chastelain's role and the importance of putting collective weight behind an authoritative indication from him that serious progress was being made. He wondered if Trimble could on Saturday urge his party to defer a definitive decision on the basis that a new De Chastelain report had indicated the prospect of a major breakthrough by the end of the month. He also commented that the two Governments would be faced with a major decision if Trimble declined to accept what both thought was a good deal from the IRA.

3. The **Secretary of State** remarked that making detailed decisions, including in relation to timetables, on the issues mentioned in the Draft Elements paper - especially normalisation - would be a major challenge and would present serious political difficulties for him, including in terms of domestic politics. He was unhappy about the *Irish Times* story linking normalisation to decommissioning, and was glad more had not been made of it in the Commons. However, he was undaunted, and was prepared to take the steps necessary in the right context.

4. The **Secretary of State** went on to say that there were two processes under way - the discussions with Sinn Féin, and the internal debate within the UUP - and that they were out of sync. We only had two days left to complete work which should have been started a month ago. A major problem was that Trimble was not in

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control of the trap he had set for himself. Mandelson had spoken to Josias Cunningham, the UUP President: Cunningham had been "magisterial" and had made clear his firm preference for suspension ahead of the UUC meeting, as against having to give effect to Trimble's post-dated resignation letter. There was to be a meeting of party officers at 10.30 on Friday morning.

5. David Trimble had had separate meetings with the Prime Minister and himself that afternoon. The **Secretary of State's** assessment was that Trimble was encouragingly calm and rational. However, he was deeply sceptical about what Sinn Féin and the IRA were up to, believing that they were only going through the motions. He said that both he and the Prime Minister had assured Trimble that they would not pressurise him: he would have to persuade himself of the merits of what might emerge. Trimble had agreed with Mandelson on the importance of his continuing contact with Adams, and said he had "put out a line" to him for a further meeting. [The **Secretary of State** described the Prime Minister, while having signed off on the current draft texts, as having "reserved his position" - this would appear to imply that, while he was happy to see if the approach proposed would work, he would not tie himself to it].

6. **The Secretary of State** said he had floated with Trimble the idea of a "post-dated suspension" - an assurance from himself that he would suspend at the end of a further given period if sufficient progress had not been made by then. Might this buy time? Trimble had not dismissed the idea out of hand.

7. However, the **Secretary of State** made clear that it was the very firm view of the British Government that Trimble could not be allowed to resign, nor could the institutions be allowed to collapse: moderate unionism would be "swept away." Basically, what was on offer from republicans would have to be sufficiently dramatic for Trimble to take back his resignation and bring the the battle to the UUC.

8. The **Minister** asked how the process would go if tomorrow the IRA came back positively. He stressed that Trimble would himself be seriously weakened

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politically by suspension.

9. **Jeffrey** responded that suspension might be the only way of preserving Trimble and the current of unionism he represented. Basically, Adams and the Taoiseach would both have to play a major role in persuading Trimble that what was on offer from the IRA - assuming something was agreed - was good enough. Trimble would have to consider his options, including that of the "post-dated suspension". But "if he says no, we're back where we started from". A major problem was the relative thinness of the draft IICD report, as opposed to the Draft Elements paper - there was little enough to sell publicly.

10. **Gallagher**, referring back to the Secretary of State's initial remarks, pointed out that normalisation could be presented as an inherent element of the Agreement, on which a strategy statement had already been published. He queried the wisdom of the post-dated suspension idea, saying that republicans might see this as a further ultimatum. As for de Chastelain's report, he pointed out that it could be strengthened if the IRA representative were to say more to the Commission.

11. **Gallagher** also thought it would be helpful if the de Chastelain report contained an appeal to the parties and the Governments to allow the additional time necessary. **Jeffrey** doubted if de Chastelain would feel able to make an overtly political appeal, but the **Minister**, acknowledging this, thought that nonetheless he could make clear the momentum of events and the need for more space.

12. The **Secretary of State** concluded that the first essential was "strong meat" from the IRA. If confirmation was received that the current approach was on, then every effort would have to be made to take advantage of it. Tactical decisions would have to be made in the light of events as they unfolded. It was agreed that the two Ministers would remain in close touch.

Rory Montgomery
10 February 2000

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