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Reference Code:	2023/154/27
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SEEN BY TAOISEACH

Ms Whelan
17.4.2000

RECEIVED 19 APR 2000

10 April 2000

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin 2

Dear Dermot,

Conversation with Peter Mandelson

I spoke to Peter Mandelson last night at a charity concert for Co-operation Ireland at the Albert Hall. We were in company with the Duke of York and David Trimble so the opportunity for an in depth conversation was limited, but Mandelson did take me aside to say that he was not happy with the way the current drafting exercise was developing and that the texts were, in his view, too republican. At one point he said that "they might have been drafted by the republicans". He emphasised that in their current state they would not run with Trimble and that Trimble had no chance of selling a package of that kind to the UUC. When I challenged him he said that for his own part he did not have a difficulty with what the two Governments were doing, but that we had to produce something that the market would bear, and as of now he thought that the clients on the Unionist side would not buy it. He was also critical of our handing over of texts to Sinn Féin.

I have to say that Mandelson was in a strange, almost detached, mood. Twice during the general conversation he embarrassed Trimble. The first occasion was when, obviously confusing Harland and Wolff with Shorts, he announced that Shorts were in serious trouble and in need of foreign orders. Trimble corrected

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him; and Prince Andrew seeing the difficulty intervened to smooth it over by turning the conversation to the general question of de-skilling in the British shipbuilding industry. The Prince, incidentally, appeared more knowledgeable than the Secretary of State about industrial policy in Northern Ireland and showed an impressive grasp of detail. The second faux pas was when Trimble told the Prince that the father of the compere for the evening's concert, Patrick Kielty, had been killed by Loyalist paramilitaries. Trimble intended the remark to sound sympathetic but Mandelson misunderstood him and asked loudly if the father had been a member of the IRA. There was an awkward silence while Trimble whispered to him and again the Prince smoothed over the moment by remarking that there could hardly be a family in Northern Ireland that was untouched by the conflict.

Michael Gaffey has reported on criticism of Mandelson in the British media. Hardly a day goes by without someone asking me about his abilities, his relationship with Number 10 and whether he is up to the job - senior journalists, senior Civil Servants, other Ambassadors, and even Labour MPs who support the process and the Agreement. Some of this is the usual stuff of politics and reveals a certain delight in the difficulties of others. But I think that the political class in London have begun to entertain serious doubts about the Secretary of State's surefootedness. This seems to me to go beyond the decision to suspend the Executive, which many people understand, and relates rather to the way he has conducted himself in the meantime, his inability to convey a consistent message, a preoccupation with his own image and a consequent weakness for the media (which can be a media weakness).

This is not particularly good from our point of view. It is not in our interest to have a Secretary of State who is detached or, to use your own phrase "out of sympathy" with what we and Number 10 are trying to do. Mowlam although she may from time to time have been indiscreet with the media about her difficulties with the Prime Minister did not brief at the expense of the negotiations or the process. And even when there were strains in the relationship with us she generally did not engage in critical commentary to the media about personalities on the Irish side. There is evidence that Mandelson is using his contacts with the press to brief in ways that are not helpful, and that he may have a different agenda than that being elaborated between ourselves and Number 10. My instinct is that this is more than the tough cop, soft cop routine that we sometimes get from the British although, I suppose, it cannot be completely ruled out. Mandelson is still close to the Prime Minister. But his

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personality and methods, which have shown their usefulness in domestic politics, are a new and somewhat unpredictable dimension in Northern Ireland that we will need to watch in the difficult weeks ahead.

Yours sincerely,

Ted Barrington

Edward Barrington
Ambassador

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