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

Subj: Secretary of State's Reception, 12 April 2000

I attended a reception held by the Northern Ireland Secretary of State at the King's Hall, Balmoral, in honour of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh. The attendance of 300, which was representative mainly of the agricultural and rural development community, included David Trimble, Jeffrey Donaldson, Willie Thompson and George Savage of the UUP, Boyd Douglas of the Ulster Unionist Assembly Party, David Ervine of the PUP and Rev John Lockington, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church. The following comments may be of interest.

Trimble was not in a pleasant mood, despite the occasion. When I referred to the great efforts being made by both Governments to come up with an agreed implementation plan which would provide comfort and clarity for all the pro-Agreement parties, he responded truculently that the Irish Government would have to change the "knee-jerk" approach it had adopted since February. After a bit more in this vein, I referred to what I thought had been a very good meeting which he had had with the Taoiseach since then. At that, Trimble changed tack completely and said, "Oh, I always have good meetings with the Taoiseach".

Earlier in the day, at the RUC function, Trimble had accused one of the NIO officials of "lurking about like Denis Watson" (the Co. Armagh Orange Lodge Grand Master who has just joined the DUP). At the same function, Trimble made some sarcastic personal comment to Boyd Douglas (a former colleague of Watson's). Douglas said bitterly to me "If that's the best he (Trimble) can do, he'll not be long more in politics" (see below).

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Donaldson, by contrast, appeared to be most content and self-confident. When I introduced myself to him he responded very civilly and, in response to my comment about the work being done to find a way to move forward together, he simply said, "Certainly, nobody wants to go back".

I had an interesting chat with Boyd Douglas, who is a dairy farmer from Burnfoot (near Dungiven). He said he was raised as a staunch Presbyterian - he is an elder in his local church - and in a strongly unionist environment. He voted against the Agreement. At the same time, given that background, he seemed surprisingly open to some form of accommodation. He spoke about the need for what he called 'respect' - as he put it, "We could live with a lot if we had respect".

David Ervine was less down-beat than might have been expected from some of his recent public statements. He referred to "a prevailing mood of infectious gloom", however, and said it was up to the two Governments to pull things together and work to change the atmosphere and dispel that sense of gloom. He clearly remains keen to play a role and to make a contribution. If the paper that the two Governments come up with isn't enough, he said, then let us work on it together to try and improve it. He referred very positively and appreciatively to his meetings with the Taoiseach and the Minister.

Rev John Lockington, who is nearing the end of his tenure as Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, had been away for some weeks and was not completely au fait. From his widespread contacts within his community, however, he confirmed that there were many who had voted for the Good Friday Agreement and who now felt badly let down by the lack of progress in relation to decommissioning. They had, as he put it, taken "a leap of faith" but that was not reciprocated by a similar leap of faith by the republican movement. While particularly critical of the republican movement in that regard, he was also very critical of the Irish authorities and of the nationalist community for not putting enough pressure on republicans to take that necessary leap of faith. (I praised in particular his congregation's Church and Government paper of last month as being very helpful and far-sighted.)

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Postscript

When the Secretary of State introduced me to the Queen, I explained our main task simply as assisting the two Governments to cooperate as effectively as possible in the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. Her precise riposte was, "You will need all of your ingenuity for that."

Comment

It was useful to be at the reception and to make contact in that particular context with a range of representatives - some of whom, I suspect, may have been slightly non-plussed at the presence of an Irish Government representative.

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