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Conversation with Gerry Loughran, 11 September 2000

I met the new Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service and Secretary of the Northern Ireland Executive, Gerry Loughran, in Belfast today. He made the following points:

SEEN BY TAOISEACH

- Mandelson is extremely close to Blair, possibly closer than any other Minister and Blair does nothing on Northern Ireland without first consulting with Mandelson. I mentioned that the absence of consultation with Dublin is a matter of serious concern. He said that Mandelson inherited a system of backroom dealing which emerged when Mo Mowlam was Secretary of State and when Trimble, finding it impossible to deal with her or not wishing to, dealt with Downing Street instead. Mandelson took over the system and did at least two backroom deals, the first on policing and the second on flags. He said that the Mandelson-Trimble deal on flags was agreed last March.

Mr Griffin
18/9/00

- Trimble suggested a third deal last week (he didn't reveal the topic) and was rebuffed. Loughran is satisfied that Mandelson now accepts that backroom dealing is counter productive. However, Mandelson believes he is implementing Patten. Loughran said that Mandelson accepts that the deal on flags is a bad one.

- Mandelson is travelling to the US next week.

- The Executive is working well. Trimble and Mallon are developing a good working relationship, possibly because they avoid getting into difficult waters. Trimble seems to be enjoying the role of First Minister and is endeavouring to

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build up a good relationship with Ministers in the Executive. He had for example praised Barbara de Brún at the last Executive meeting for the handling of the recent contaminated water issue

- Minister Empey has raised with Trimble and Mallon a problem on the energy side relating to the positioning of the proposed North-South gas pipeline. I said I would take this up in Dublin. Mallon later raised the same issue with me.

- Trimble accepts he must deal with the DUP refusal to handle the transport portfolio within the Executive and North-South but he doesn't know what to do yet.

- Loughran is concerned at the lack of progress on cooperation in the tourist section and said it's important that the joint marketing company and the Board be established within the next four to six weeks.

We are so taping!

- On broader political issues Loughran said that the Irish side should try to avoid rocking the boat this side of the South Antrim by-election. He accepted that there are issues such as policing and flags about which we have concerns and he fully understood the case I made to him about the need for the two Governments to consult. He also accepted that it might be necessary for us to say things in public but underscored Trimble's difficulties in the run up to the by-election.

- In the Referendum the Unionist vote in the South Antrim Constituency split roughly 50/50 pro and anti Agreement. It's largely a dormitory constituency and the turn out could be very low. Those in the constituency party loyal to Trimble are not particularly active because they dislike Burnside. McCrea of

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the DUP could take the seat and if he did so the management of the Executive, not to mention the North-South institutions, would become very difficult. The Official Unionists normally go through a phase of depression before they start to fight. They are currently in such a phase but he would expect that they will come out fighting towards the end of this week.

- On North-South cooperation he thought we should concentrate for the moment on practical results both within the areas covered by the North-South Ministerial Council and in areas outside such as energy where there is very good cooperation. Unionists, including Empey, would be very sensitive about broadening the remit of the North-South Council, at least for the present.

- Personally, Loughran said he finds it difficult working for two masters (Trimble and Mallon) at the one time.

Dáithí O'Ceallaigh
11 September

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