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cc Sec. O'Coalla
A-E Clks.
Sec. Gaeltacht
Belfast, Armagh,
London

Meeting with Bairbre de Brún

Northern Minister for Education

Mr Weber

SEEN BY TAOISEACH

I met with Bairbre de Brún in Stormont yesterday for a general discussion on current political developments. She made the following observations ;

Mr Griffin
F. 7. 00

Her position in Government

- She is personally much more relaxed in Government on this occasion. The suspension period allowed her to reflect on her role in Government, and she believes that, prior to suspension, she tried to micro-manage too much. She is now prioritising her time and her objectives and is delegating less contentious areas of her brief to her senior civil servants who report to her regularly.

- During the period of suspension there were some decisions taken in the Department of Health that she disagreed with, but she will not be making an issue of it.

- She seemed reasonably relaxed about the probable postponement of the plenary NSMC until after the summer. She was delighted that the individual sectoral meetings were recommencing. On the British-Irish Council, she is very wary about how the drugs issue will be handled. She mentioned that any paper which concentrated on closer police cooperation, in advance of the full implementation of the Patten proposals, would cause her party difficulties. Her Department has the lead role on drug misuse in the North.

- She was surprised that there was no proposal to completely rerun d'Hondt in the event of a DUP withdrawal from Government, leaving their Ministeries to be filled automatically by UUP and Alliance nominees. She recalls that this was not the understanding during the negotiations. Sinn Féin secured many more votes than Alliance and should, in theory, be given preference over Alliance if they wanted either of the DUP Ministries. However, SF are happy with Education and Health and do not want a change.

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The Patten Proposals

- On Patten, she argued strongly for the full implementation of the Commission's proposals. She criticised the Irish Government for being "too soft" on the British, especially in the earlier stages of the discussions. I countered by pointing out that we had only received the text of the Bill the day before publication.

- She said that there was a tendency in the two Governments not to take the SF complaints at face value. She reiterated on several occasions that police reform was central to the Good Friday Agreement and a core matter for Republicans.

- Sinn Féin was tired of negotiating agreements only to find the British Government trying to row back afterwards when it came to legislation and implementation stages. Police reform was a part of the Good Friday Agreement, it was the subject of Patten Commission, it was included in the Hillsborough package and still Sinn Féin had to negotiate the same issues over again during the passage of the Police Bill.

- (I had a separate discussion with Alex Maskey while in Belfast. In the course of a general conversation, he pointed out that there is simply no way that Sinn Féin could live with any disqualification clause in the Bill for offences committed during the Troubles. He said that it was a matter of Republican theology and touched on issues like the legitimacy of the struggle, the attempts by the British to criminalize Republican prisoners etc.)

The Equality Commission

- She is personally disappointed with the work of the new Equality Commission which has a very low profile, even compared with the less powerful Fair Employment Commission. Her Department has just received guidelines for the new statutory equality scheme which are disappointingly unambitious. She recalled the effort which the Nationalist parties and the Irish Government had put into shaping the legislation in 1998. She intends to challenge the Equality Commission on the issue shortly.

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Electoral Issues

- Sinn Féin is looking forward with relish to the forthcoming Westminster elections and believe that they will do very well. Recent council by-elections results show a huge rise in Sinn Féin support and if this is carried through at the next election, they could emerge as the largest Nationalist party

Ray Bassett
Anglo-Irish Division
14 June 2000

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