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SECRET

Ministers Cowen and O'Donnell's meeting with the Secretary of State Washington, 17 March 2000

1. During the visits of Minister Cowen and Minister of State O'Donnell to Washington for the Saint Patrick's Day celebrations, they met with the Secretary of State, Peter Mandelson, at the Irish Embassy. At that meeting, Mandelson was accompanied by Bill Jeffrey, Tom Kelly and Nick Perry of the Northern Ireland Office, while Ambassador O hUiginn, Dermot Gallagher, Declan Kelly, Tom Russell and the undersigned accompanied the Irish Ministers.

2. Minister Cowen opened the meeting and expressed the need for "sensible security arrangements" throughout Northern Ireland. There was a need for local people to see change on the ground. He reiterated his view that the only way forward out of the present difficulties was through the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement.

3. The Secretary of State replied that he could make a very credible case that security changes on the ground could produce positive political results which in turn would reduce the security threat. However, at present this would be impossible to sell to "Middle-England". It would simply be regarded as IRA appeasement. Normalisation and demilitarisation were better done in a very low key manner which would not frighten the public. That obviously carried the downside that it was of little political value to

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Republicans.

4. The Secretary of State spoke at some length about the difficult press he was receiving in England, mentioning in particular that the Daily Telegraph had published a number of editorials attacking his remarks on the Marian Finucane show about the "chinless wonders" in the British household regiments. He said that there were elements in the media in London who were very hostile and who thought that they could get at the Prime Minister by attacking the peace process in Northern Ireland.

5. Minister Cowen said that there was a need to avoid misunderstanding over what was meant by the full implementation of the Agreement. In this regard, he saw very considerable merit in the two governments establishing a small implementation committee, with ideally two from each side, to draw up an implementation programme for the Agreement.

6. The Secretary of State (oddly) asked if this committee would be any way related to that proposed by the Women's Coalition? Ministers Cowen and O'Donnell replied (emphatically)in the negative; the committee envisaged would be confined to the two Governments.

7. The Secretary of State then agreed with the proposal, and in principle with the small numbers suggested. On the British side, he saw both the political and security sides being represented on it. Mr. Mandelson mentioned that the Prime Minister was becoming strongly engaged again, and he also stressed the need for the British side to be absolutely clear about what they would be agreeing to (i.e. on normalisation). In this regard, he said that both governments needed to see something on paper

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fairly quickly.

8. The Secretary of State went on to outline the difficulties David Trimble was facing over a series of issues, including the outworking of the Patten recommendations and the forthcoming proposals on the reform of the Criminal Justice system. Many Unionists saw any change in the area of symbols and emblems as "the decommissioning of their Britishness".

9. The Minister of State replied that the Unionists had signed up to these reforms at the time of the Good Friday Agreement. There could be no re-negotiation of the terms now.

10. It was agreed that a further Ministerial meeting would take place on Tuesday 21 March in Dublin, when the Secretary of State will be fulfilling a long standing engagement here.

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