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**CONFIDENTIAL**

25 February 2000

**FOR SECRETARY GALLAGHER FROM AMBASSADOR**

Taoiseach
A depressing but probably accurate assessment by Seán Ó hUiginn here 29-2-2000

1. Mr Martin McGuinness and Ms Rita O'Hare called to the Embassy for about an hour last night after their meeting with Mr Berger at the White House.

2. I had already heard from the White House that the meeting had generated little optimism. The Sinn Féin approach seemed totally focussed on calming their own constituency. The US message had been about the need to look forward, not back, and to build on the progress made to relaunch the institutions.

3. The Sinn Féin response had been unencouraging. They queried the value of effort unless it could be established whether Trimble was actually in favour of the Agreement or in reality bent on sidelining it. They reiterated their angry views on suspension and the actions of the British Government, and described the destabilizing effect on their followers. They seemed to be distancing Sinn Féin from the IRA, and from further efforts to secure decommissioning. They flagged the flavour of Gerry Adams press conference to be held the following morning (Irish time). They indicated also the likelihood of a further statement from the IRA, which would supply the requested clarity, but, it was implied, clarity of a negative and unwelcome kind. The US side pointed to the danger of undermining the credibility of the de Chastelain

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exercise, and the danger if the 'time out' for the institutions grew too long through lack of movement on any side.

4. I expressed my worries to the Sinn Féin visitors that they seemed to be opting for a "hardball" strategy, which might eventually take them to places they didn't want to go. Whatever the precise Sinn Féin obligation under the Good Friday Agreement, a refusal to discuss decommissioning had to be a clear breach of the Agreement, and would give rise to new political attacks on them on that ground, as well as further weakening the Agreement itself. The electorate might well be patient on decommissioning as long as they felt movement was in prospect but would take a very different and unforgiving view if the Republicans seemed to be aiming at some permanent 'twin-track' approach.

5. Mr McGuinness painted a bleak picture of the effects of recent developments. Several very significant personalities had left their ranks ("not retired; gone elsewhere" he clarified). It was a mystery how Dublin could underestimate the danger of losing the current IRA leadership and he stressed vehemently the need for clear and above all consistent policies. He said that the internal debate on whether a political vacuum could be used as an argument for return to war would in the last analysis be easier to manage (I assume in the benign sense) than the debate on decommissioning.

6. I said arguments about why we should not have got to this point did not alter the fact we were at this point. "Time out" was obviously dangerous but we should seek to make the best use of it. If the institutions went out over decommissioning we had inevitably to deal with this issue as part of their reinstatement. If the Governments were implementing in good faith all the commitments of the Agreement they could

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themselves deliver would this provide the context for movement? Did the Republicans not have a duty to spell out what was attainable so that we could perhaps arrive at a solution working "with the grain" of Republican traditions?

7. McGuinness made clear they attached some importance to reflections which Blair had shared with Adams (I did not establish in what context) about the need to redefine decommissioning, possibly in the context of the May date. I said that I felt Mandelson had very much been in the market for lateral thinking on decommissioning, and both Governments would be receptive to any new ideas on it. McGuinness refused to be drawn on what the redefinition might consist of (timing?, non-use equals decommissioning? stand-down of the IRA? other confidence building measures?). He tended to accept my point that redefinition could not amount to a total air-brushing of the issue, agreeing that Trimble could not be expected to go along with "a cod".

8. I urged strongly that the way forward was through salvaging and building on the enormous achievements of the Agreement and recent discussions with the Irish Government, rather than embarking on a confrontation which could well spiral out of control. If "P O'Neill" could not write anything helpful, perhaps he should be sent on a holiday? McGuinness was jocosely non-committal on this, but stressed the extent to which Sinn Féin felt the nationalist community in Northern Ireland backed their stand. (They seem to see the recent Antrim local Government by-election, and the turnout at the Tom Williams funeral as significant pointers). McGuinness said if there was an election in Northern Ireland next week Mandelson would get the surprise of his life (i.e. at the strength of Sinn Féin support).

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9. While making allowance for tactical "messages" being given to me and others to reinforce the points they are presumably making directly to the Government, it seemed depressingly clear nevertheless that

(a) their current priority is stabilisation of their own constituency;

(b) that they see a "hardball" confrontational phase as the best means of doing that, and also perhaps, of forcing a redefinition of the decommissioning debate;

(c) that they accept the dangers of confrontation escalating out of control but feel they can manage that without a relapse into violence;

(d) while genuinely worried about the dangers of the political vacuum, they feel that they have a better chance of keeping the cease-fire in those circumstances than they would have in selling or managing a process of decommissioning.

ENDS

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