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From : THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

cc FA/APS
Press
CLP



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Prime Minister
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21 January 1997

Dear John,

**PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S
COALITION (NIWC): 22 JANUARY 1997**

The Prime Minister is to meet a delegation from the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition on Wednesday 22 January at 2.45 pm. The delegation will comprise Ms Monica McWilliams, Chair of the Women's Coalition, and Ms Pearl Sagar, Ms Bronagh Hinds and Mrs May Blood. Ms McWilliams and Ms Sagar are the two Women's Coalition delegates at the Talks. Brief notes on each are attached at Annex A. The Secretary of State and Michael Ancram will be present.

Objectives of the meeting

The coalition sought the meeting in late November to urge a positive approach by the Government to the inclusion of Sinn Fein and to the resolution of the decommissioning debate. They are likely now to press for continued efforts to make progress in the talks; for HMG to re-confirm its commitment to the present talks process; and for HMG to take all possible steps to bring about an IRA ceasefire and the inclusion of Sinn Fein.

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HMG's objective will be to recognise the positive achievement and constructive outlook of the Coalition. The aim should be to listen and to offer encouragement for the Coalition's generally constructive and reasonable approach to the talks. General lines to take are provided at Annex B.

The NIWC

The Northern Ireland Women's Coalition was formed to contest the 30 May elections in Northern Ireland, specifically as a response to the low level of participation by women in Northern Ireland public life. Notwithstanding their lack of an established position, and of their non-sectarian cross-community approach, they succeeded in fielding 70 candidates, and in polling just over 1% of the votes, (more than a number of well-established minor parties), - a rather impressive achievement. It is not yet decided whether the Coalition will field candidates at the General Election (unlikely), or in local government election on 21 May (more likely).

The NIWC and the Talks

In the Talks, the Women's Coalition have taken a constructive line, consistently arguing for compromise and early movement towards substantive negotiations. They have been impatient of the obstructionist tactics of Dr Paisley and Mr McCartney, and hostility between the Coalition and those parties regularly spills over into the talks. They are equally critical of the hesitation of the UUP. They have argued for both Governments, and the Independent Chairmen, to take a more active role in overcoming the decommissioning hurdle (not always with a very realistic appreciation of what is possible). They have argued (based

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on foreign analogies, including South Africa), against prior decommissioning requirements, arguing for the Mitchell compromise (on which they suggest the Government, under Unionist pressure, is lukewarm).

NIWC are not key players in the talks process and their influence on public opinion is currently limited. As they grow in experience, it may become greater and is likely to be beneficial.

They have been anxious that the entry of Sinn Fein should not be obstructed. Following the Government's statement on 28 November 1996 setting out the terms of entry for Sinn Fein to the political talks process the Women's Coalition expressed concern to Michael Ancram. It was this statement that led them to seek the present meeting. They believed that Sinn Fein should be admitted within a guaranteed time period on the basis of an unequivocal restoration of the ceasefire, subject to "absolute confirmation" - that this was genuine. They were unable to provide details as to what would constitute "absolute confirmation". The criteria set out in the Government's statement were, they believed, widely seen by nationalists as raising additional hurdles, and interpreted as an attempt to put off Sinn Fein's entry indefinitely.

NIWC and the Forum

Mrs McWilliams and Mrs Sagar participate fully in the Forum, but are strongly critical of its fixedly Unionist outlook. They have also criticised its Chairman, Mr John Gorman. Mr Gorman's performance has often been ineffective, especially in the early days of the Forum. Agreement on an alternative

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is, however, unlikely). NIWC's participation in the Forum, together with that of the Alliance and Labour members, has been particularly important since the withdrawal of the SDLP to provide some balance to the Unionist parties. They recently produced a minority report on the boycotting by Catholic shoppers of Protestant-owned businesses in rural areas since Drumcree, believing the majority report - though approved by Alliance and Labour, as well as the Unionist parties - to be founded on hearsay, to give unhelpful prominence to the problem, and to be generally at odds with the Forum's responsibility for providing understanding.

The NIWC may refer to the Forum's future. Under the legislation passed last year, the Forum would lapse at the end of May and must be suspended earlier if the multi-party Talks are suspended - which will in fact happen before the election. The legislation would allow us thereafter to revive the Forum for a further period until May 1998. No decisions have been reached on whether to do so.

Position of Women in Northern Ireland

Much of the motivation for founding the Coalition was the low rate of participation by women in Northern Ireland public life. Mrs McWilliams and Mrs Sagar are the only regular women participants in the talks apart from Mrs Owen, the Irish Justice Minister (several other women are prominent in Forum proceedings). A general brief on this is attached (Annex C): but the Coalition is unlikely to discuss this seriously during a short meeting.

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Roisin McAliskey

The Coalition has supported demands for the bailing of Roisin McAliskey, the pregnant daughter of Bernadette McAliskey, who is currently on remand pending the outcome of extradition proceedings on suspicion of involvement in terrorism. A note by the Home Office on this case is attached at Annex D.

A draft press line, should one be required, is attached at Annex E.

Yours ever,

Ken

W K LINDSAY

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ANNEX A

NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S COALITION: PARTICIPANTS AT MEETING

Ms Monica McWilliams (a delegate to the talks) is Chair of the Coalition. She is a Senior Lecturer in sociology at the University of Ulster, and an expert on domestic violence (she has co-authored several reports commissioned by the Government). She has been a tireless promoter of women's rights for some years. She is new to the political scene and rather anxious about her vulnerability on this account. She has grown noticeably in stature during the Talks.

Ms Pearl Sagar (the other talks delegate) is a community activist from East Belfast and a member of the East Belfast Development Agency.

Ms Bronagh Hinds, who is the power behind the Coalition throne, and much in evidence at the talks although not elected, is Principal of the Ulster People's College, and holds a wide range of other public appointments.

Mrs May Blood MBE has a background of many years in community work centred on the Shankill Road, but with a strong emphasis on cross-community partnership. The Prime Minister met Mrs Blood at dinner at Hillsborough before Christmas.

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ANNEX C

WOMEN IN DECISION MAKING IN NORTHERN IRELANDWomen's Movement

Over the last 30 years a very active women's movement has developed in Northern Ireland. The 'Troubles' brought many women to the forefront of community development to preserve their families, homes and communities. They have linked with academics and more traditional women's organisations through a number of umbrella groups. They have also established successful cross-community relationships, even at the height of the Troubles, and from this has arisen a strong interest in expressing their political opinion.

The ceasefires provided an opportunity for further development. A number of conferences were organised on women's role in the future of Northern Ireland. The Government provided support to two conferences - 'Women Shaping the Future' (November 1995) and 'Reaching Common Ground' (June 1996) - both of which examined the need to increase women's influence in politics. Baroness Denton, aware of this mood, also held public meetings across the Province attended by over 1,000 women all keen to put their views on their future role in a peaceful society to Government.

Women's Coalition

These conferences created a consensus that women in Northern Ireland had more to unite than divide them. This principle of inclusiveness was felt to be key to the foundation of the Women's Coalition, in which a group of women put forward the proposal to be recognised as a political party and seek representation at the Talks in order to attempt to break the male domination of the peace process, to present the view that people can agree to differ and work together for the common good and the sake of the next generation.

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In order to emphasise their commitment to this principle and their ability to make it work the two representatives of the Women's Coalition were deliberately chosen to represent a mix of Protestant and Roman Catholic as well as working class and middle class.

Platform for Action

The Government is working on the implementation of the Platform for Action agreed in Beijing. Baroness Denton will shortly be hosting its annual meeting with NGOs representing a wide variety of women in Northern Ireland to report on Government's progress in implementing the Platform. One of the key areas in the Platform concerns 'Women in Decision-Making' and the work being done by encouraging more women to play a part in decision-making processes. Another commitment given at Beijing was to mainstream women's concerns into all policy areas.

EU Fourth Action Programme

Also in pursuit of the Government's commitment to encourage women to play a greater part in decision-making, the Government is supporting a project part funded by the EU Fourth Action Programme. This project concerns 'Women in Decision-Making' and involves local women working with transnational partners (from Sweden and ROI) to determine effective strategies to achieve gender balance in decision-making at national and regional levels.

Fair Play

Government is also working in partnership with others representing the voluntary, public, private sectors, EOC(NI), Opportunity 2000 (NI) and trades unions in promoting the Fair Play initiative. Fair Play's main aim in Northern Ireland is to help women realise their full potential, in order to contribute to the public life and the economic well-being of Northern Ireland.

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To date, Fair Play has identified and is tackling a number of barriers which prevent women from realising their full potential and having a greater say in decision-making in Northern Ireland. These include lack of confidence and lack of information/networks.

Some key facts on women in Northern Ireland are attached.

Key Facts on Women in Northern Ireland

- 44% of people in employment in Northern Ireland are female. (45% in GB.)
- Women's average hourly earnings are 84% of men's. (80% in GB.)
- 34% of public appointments are held by women. (31% in UK - Source: "Public Bodies 1996".)
- Of the 144 publicly appointed bodies in Northern Ireland, 26 Chair and 15 Deputy Chair posts are held by women. (GB figures are not readily available.)
- There are no women MPs or MEPs.
- 11% of Councillors in Local Government Districts in Northern Ireland are women. (No comparative up-to-date figures available for GB.)
- Out of 26 Local Councils 3 have a Woman Mayor/Chair, 4 have a woman as Deputy Mayor/Chair. (No comparative up-to-date figures available for GB.)
- In February 1996 Aideen McGinley was appointed Chief Executive of Fermanagh District Council. She is the first woman to hold such a post in Northern Ireland.

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ANNEX D

ROISIN McALISKEY: BRIEF BY THE HOME OFFICEHealthcare

- Ms McAliskey is in good general health; her pregnancy is progressing normally (she is currently 17 weeks pregnant) and she is giving no cause for concern. She is seen daily by the midwife and the duty doctor, and regularly by the gynaecologist. HM Prison Holloway has specialist expertise and interest in caring for pregnant women. The prison, along with all prisons, has the backup of the National Health Service for both inpatient and outpatient facilities. In addition, consultants are contracted by the Prison Service to carry out clinics in the prisons themselves. Where necessary, prisoners are taken under escort to outside hospitals. Pregnant inmates receive the same treatment as do pregnant women in the community.

Daily routine

- Ms McAliskey is constantly supervised by trained prison officers. She is offered full association during the day. The only time she is required to be in her cell is at mealtimes and night-time lockup. At all other times she can associate freely with other prisoners on her unit. She is regularly seen by the Roman Catholic Chaplaincy and a member of the local Board of Visitors. Ms McAliskey has access to the full range of books from the prison library and is also supplied with materials for in-cell activity by the education department.

Exercise

- Ms McAliskey is offered exercise on a daily basis in a secure outside area. She has been unhappy with this arrangement and wishes to take exercise in the main

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exercise area with other prisoners. Her security category does not allow for this.

Detention**Visits**

- For security reasons all visits need to be approved under the Approved Visitors Scheme. Under this scheme all visitors are required to provide photographs of themselves and details of their relationship to the inmate for verification by the police. Once this procedure has been completed each application is considered on its own merits. Ms McAliskey has been visited by her partner, mother, father, sister, solicitors and two Members of Parliament. These visits have taken place under closed visits conditions.

Extradition

- An authority to proceed in this case has been signed by a Home Office Minister.
- It is now for Bow Street to set a date for the committal hearing.
- The case will come before Home Office Ministers again after consideration by the courts. There are a number of routes of appeal and Ms McAliskey will have the opportunity to make representations against her surrender to the German authorities before any decision on issuing a warrant for her surrender is made.

If needed

The release of James Corry by the Minister of Justice in the Republic of Ireland is a matter for the Republic of Ireland and Germany. It has no read-across to Ms McAliskey's case.

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BACKGROUND

The German authorities have requested the extradition of Roisin McAliskey in connection with PIRA's mortar attack on the British Army's barracks in Osnabruck on 28 June.

Roisin McAliskey is the daughter of Bernadette McAliskey, a former Republican MP for Mid-Ulster, best known for attacking Reginald Maudling in the Commons in January 1972. She is five months' pregnant.

The Prison Service has assessed Ms McAliskey as a High Risk Category A prisoner. She is currently being held at HMP Holloway (a Category B prison) where on-site ante-natal care is routinely available.

James Corry is also wanted by the German authorities in connection with the Osnabruck attack. He was being held by the Irish authorities pending extradition to Germany but was released by the Irish Minister of Justice on 14 January.

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ANNEX E

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH THE NORTHERN IRELAND WOMEN'S
COALITION: 22 JANUARY 1997

PRESS LINE

The Prime Minister today met representatives from the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition to discuss current political developments in Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister was accompanied by Michael Ancram QC MP. The Women's Coalition was represented by Ms Monica McWilliams, Chair of the Coalition, Ms Pearl Sagar, Ms Bronagh Hinds and Mrs May Blood.

This was the Prime Minister's first meeting with representatives of the Coalition. The Prime Minister congratulated them on their entry into the field of politics in Northern Ireland and commended them on their constructive and positive attitude in the multi-party talks process.

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