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Politics

Blair 'humbled' at meeting with Omagh victims

Tuesday, July 10, 2007

By Matthew McCreary

The horror of the Omagh bomb and its effects on former Prime Minister Tony Blair have been recalled in extracts from Alastair Campbell's diaries.

The former press secretary and confidant to Mr Blair detailed the moment he found out about the blast as well as the reaction of the prime minister, who was on holiday at the time.

He also recounts how Mr Blair had to borrow some clothing before appearing on television to comment on the atrocity.

"There was a problem in that he had arrived ahead of his clothes and he was scruffily dressed," reads the diary entry for Saturday, August 15, 1998.

"I asked which cops were with him, and he ended up using Bill Lloyd's suit and a shirt borrowed from one of the neighbours."

The diaries also recall Blair's resolve not to let the incident harm the peace process.

"TB (Tony Blair) said this was the last resistance, and if we saw it off with public opinion there totally on our side, it could be another turning point," Campbell wrote.

Campbell also recounts how the Prime Minister had been deeply affected by a visit to meet some of the victims of the bombing in hospital in Belfast.

"He described some of the scenes he saw, the wounds and the scars and the mutilated bodies, and all the human suffering around them. But basically they were all giving him the same message - keep going, don't give up, work for peace harder than ever. He said it was really humbling."

The book also details other key moments in the Northern Ireland peace process, such as the ground-breaking visit to Downing Street in December 1997 of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness.

The much-anticipated diaries were published yesterday, less than two weeks after Mr Blair left office.

Despite the publicity which has surrounded the book, however, Mr Campbell has insisted that it will not provide a "gold mine" for opponents of Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

"What I'm not going to do is publish a book that allows David Cameron to think he's got a gold mine to use against the new Labour prime Minister," he told the BBC.

It's agreed then . . . we all like Des O'Connor

Tony Blair, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness "somehow" ended up discussing whether they liked entertainer and TV host Des O'Connor, the Campbell diaries reveal.

At the meeting on January 18, 2001, Adams said that in the absence of anything concrete to report he could go out and brief the media that there was agreement that "we all liked Des O'Connor".

"I said you just like his surname," Campbell quipped.

During their "very relaxed and jolly" discussions they also talked about Blair's neighbours and former Formula One champion Jackie Stewart.

Campbell reports that Blair, Downing Street senior aide Jonathan Powell and others believed that Sinn Fein were better negotiators and that glances and gestures, even from the party's policing spokesman Gerry Kelly, could be "disconcerting".

Blair also told the Sinn Fein delegation that the process was going round in circles.

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The previous month McGuinness had told Blair he was "the guy going out to republicans saying Blair is a good guy, different to every other Prime Minister . . .

". . . But they laugh at me if I say that policing is a good deal for us."

Campbell notes it as "interesting" that the senior republican, who is now Deputy First Minister, did more of the talking than Adams.

"Gerry Kelly and Martin Ferris did the strong silent bit as usual," he wrote.

Back in June 1997, then SDLP leader John Hume told Tony Blair that he could set up a meeting between McGuinness and the senior Northern Ireland Office official Quentin Thomas.

"(Blair) said that was not possible and he had to say that if SF and the IRA did not come on board . . . and the IRA declare a ceasefire, he would acknowledge that we had to move on without them.

"Hume felt that we were close to something, though John Holmes (another official) warned me he always said that."

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