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12 June, 1997.

Mr. Seán O hUiginn,
Second Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs,
St. Stephen's Green,
DUBLIN 2.

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PST: PSS: Messrs. Teahon,
Donlon & Dalton:
Ambassadors London &
Washington: Joint Secretary:
Counsellors A-I

Taoiseach
[Signature]
12.6.97

Dear Secretary,

Discussion with David Trimble

As already reported I attended a reception last night at the Unionist Information Office here in London hosted by David Trimble. This is the first time, as far as we can recall, that the Ambassador has been invited to a UUP reception although Unionists do from time to time attend Embassy events. Trimble for instance came to my reception at the Conservative Party Conference last year, and UUP officials have been to the Embassy.

The turnout was relatively small, never more than sixty or seventy, but interesting. Apart from a few UUP MPs and Unionist supporters the reception was attended by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Mo Mowlam, Minister of State Paul Murphy, David Montgomery of the Mirror Group, several senior journalists (John Kampfner of the Financial Times, Don Macintyre of the Independent, Frank Millar of the Irish Times, and Bernard Purcell of the Irish Independent) and one or two officials from the Northern Ireland Office. What struck me however was the number of young, apparently well-educated and articulate UUP activists who were there, evidence I feel of Trimble's efforts to modernise the organisation of the Party.

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David Burnside, the Director of the Office, gave a short speech of welcome in which he emphasised the need to change the image of the UUP and to project a more inclusive, progressive and non-sectarian viewpoint. There was a presentation of a small, gold, red hand of Ulster pin to the Secretary of State which she accepted with grace and wit. And Esmond Birnie launched the publication of his book "Without Profit or Prophets" a defence of Unionism and Unionist ideas from a right-wing perspective with which not all of his colleagues were entirely comfortable (a copy has been sent to David Cooney in the bag).

Two of the main talking points of the evening were the prospects of progress in the Belfast talks and the impact of the change of Government in Ireland on the peace process. Amongst journalists and UUP sympathisers some fears were expressed about what was seen as a more nationalist approach by a Fianna Fail led Government, but it was noticeable that the two MPs whom I spoke to (Trimble and Beggs) did not share this view. Beggs said that he viewed Deputy Ahern as a pragmatic politician with whom they could do business and he saw the new Government as being in a position to exert leverage on Sinn Fein. Trimble spoke in a similar manner, and when Bruce Anderson of the Spectator intervened in our conversation to criticise the change Trimble pointedly cut him short saying that he should not rush to judgment.

Trimble expressed considerable concern about the efforts of the two Governments to work out a paper on decommissioning. He said emphatically that the UUP would reject any such paper "on principle", almost without reference to its contents. When I pointed that, while the Governments might propose, nothing could be done in the talks without sufficient consensus he said that that was to miss the point. He and his Party had been saying since the negotiations began "talk to us, don't act over our heads" but the Governments had either not been listening or had chosen to ignore them. If he had any message that I should give to the new Government in Dublin it was "talk to us", otherwise we would be off to a bad start. On his own proposal for pigeon-holing the decommissioning issue, Trimble said it removed any excuse for delay in moving to substantive negotiations. When I pointed out that his approach could be seen as simply postponing the issue, in effect booby-trapping the negotiations for the time when the IRA might declare a cease-fire, he simply repeated his statement that his approach removed the decommissioning obstacle and gave every opportunity to the Parties in the talks to move on without Sinn Fein.

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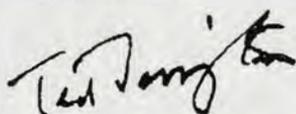
The main points I took from the conversations were

- the UUP at leadership level is keeping its counsel on a change of Government and prepared to give it a chance. Trimble was more restrained in his demeanour and language than he can be on occasions such as this and deliberately signalled that he is not rushing to judgment
- at the same time he is also signalling that he is watching carefully what any new administration will say and do particularly on the question of decommissioning. What is difficult to judge is whether this is a tactical manoeuvre using the change in the South as a means of further delay or a genuine plea to find a way through
- although Trimble addressed his general remarks to both Governments he did specifically say that he was interested in talking to the Irish Government - "tell your new Government, talk to us".

Trimble's plea for caution on the decommissioning paper is in contrast to the NIO's view that we should now press ahead as conveyed last night to Philip McDonagh on which I have asked him to do a separate report.

I will be having lunch today with John Chilcot (at his invitation) at which doubtless these themes will come up again.

Yours sincerely



Ted Barrington
Ambassador