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4 October 1998

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

PSSG:
Messrs. Teahon, Mansergh &
Dalton: Ambassadors London
& Washington: Joint
Secretary: Counsellors A-1

cc:

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Handwritten notes:
m. h. ...
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The Taoiseach
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7.10.98

Dear Secretary,

The media at the Labour Party Conference

The Labour Party Conference in Blackpool last week is generally agreed to have been a triumph for Tony Blair in underlining his currently unassailable dominance over the British political scene and his control over his party. The media were present in full force and inevitably carped at the stage-managed aspects of the Conference and the avoidance of open dispute - even the strength of feeling among delegates against any change in the voting system did not lead to a row. Northern Ireland emerged as one of the most interesting issues for many visiting journalists, perhaps because of the absence of dispute on the floor and the heartfelt and emotional ovations for Mo Mowlam, but also because of the presence in Blackpool for several days of David Trimble, Seamus Mallon and Gerry Adams.

Most journalists I spoke to were taken by surprise by the strength of the Conference reaction to Tony Blair's praise of Mo Mowlam. Initial reporting and comment concentrated on the character of Mo Mowlam, coming dangerously close to, undoubtedly short term, canonisation. This was followed by the inevitable ripples of comment to redress the balance. Veteran commentators Paul Routledge, of the Mirror, and Alan Watkins, of the Observer, drew my attention to growing suggestions that Mowlam was developing as a possible future leader, and to the political dangers this opened up for her - whispers were to be expected in order to bring her back down to size. There was a general assumption that she will no longer be Secretary of State when the Conference meets next year in Bournemouth and many were asking by the end of the week what post the Prime Minister would consider her for, given her outstanding popularity. The role of Deputy Leader was mentioned by several.

although John Prescott does not come across as a man contemplating retirement.

The massive support shown by delegates for the achievement of the Good Friday Agreement was accompanied by a gradual realisation by the British media present that difficulties remain in its implementation. The stand-off on the twin issues of decommissioning and the formation of the shadow executive had not until then received the full attention of the London media, partly because of a degree of fatigue with Northern Ireland following the traumas of the summer and partly because of the complexity and apparent intractability of the question for a British audience. The presence of the leading Northern political figures and their contributions throughout the week did much to reawaken interest.

The overall framework within which the generality of the British media view Northern Ireland and the role of the Irish Government has been transformed by the Agreement, with only a small number of right-wing journalists, mainly working for the Telegraph Group, refusing to accept that it now provides the context for all political movement on Northern Ireland. On the decommissioning issue, David Trimble and Gerry Adams were successful in generating debate among journalists on precisely how little room for manoeuvre each now had, with Seamus Mallon's warnings underlining the need for some movement on each side. Des McCartan, of the Belfast Telegraph, was briefed by the Prime Minister's Office and the NIO to the effect that only the parties themselves could resolve the issue. At the same time, Downing Street was emphasising the Prime Minister's determination to keep in touch with the leaders by phone during his visit to China - leading a number of Irish journalists to recall the long-distance telephone diplomacy on the Heads of Agreement document during his visit to Japan in January. (RTE even considered sending its London correspondent to cover the China visit this week - he will not travel, however).

While there was a general, although uninformed, assumption that the current impasse would be resolved somehow, Northern Ireland journalists present emphasised that it would be "a long haul" and that whatever compromise might emerge to allow the formation of the executive, the decommissioning issue would provide the material for periodic crises over the coming eighteen months.

A question which British journalists continued to ask was just how constrained is David Trimble by opinion within his assembly party. A number of journalists, including Frank Millar, insist that the opposition among assembly members to the formation of a shadow executive in advance of some demonstrable move to start the decommissioning process has been underestimated by many. Ken Reid, of UTV, believes that Trimble is confident that something (unspecific) can be worked out, with the assistance of Tony Blair, and that he will take the gamble of forming an executive, but not until after 31 October. Des McCartan told me that Trimble had made it very

clear to him he did not consider himself as having to work to a 31 October deadline and that he felt "there is still plenty of time". It was in this spirit that he informed some journalists in advance that he would be "saying nothing" at the CBI-TUC fringe meeting with Seamus Mallon. The result was a somewhat disjointed speech touching on a number of unrelated issues, including his dislike for Proportional Representation and the prospects for Labour's emergence as the main party of the union, leaving it to Seamus Mallon to speak forcefully and bluntly on the dangers of the current political impasse.

Many British journalists remain intrigued by Trimble personally, finding him very difficult to read politically. One of his strongest supporters in the media is Matthew D'Ancona of the Sunday Telegraph who told me that he had decided some time ago that Trimble was the only man who could deliver the Unionist Party from its problems. He said he was convinced that Trimble wanted to make the Agreement work and that he had said to him long before he gave any indication of it publicly that he "wanted to do business with Gerry and Martin". This may, of course, be an over-enthusiastic presentation of the message that the Irish Government must do everything it can to bolster Trimble's position. D'Ancona followed up with a strong presentation of the view that some movement was required on decommissioning and that a gesture which was seen to start the process would not be dismissed by unionists as irrelevant. It could provide Trimble with the opening he needed. Jenny McCartney, also of the Sunday Telegraph, who was present for the conversation, took a more uncompromising view, revealing a conformity with her father's views which other journalists from the paper had mentioned but which had not been so obvious in previous conversations we have had.

Another view of Trimble, which was only aired on one or two occasions, and hesitantly, was that he remains very difficult to read in traditional political terms precisely because he may be prepared to leave politics at some stage to return to academic life - he may not feel under the sort of pressure which a full commitment to a long-term political career generates.

Sinn Fein's presence at the Conference provided the tabloids with some headlines, but the old venom was absent. The fascination with Gerry Adams has waned a little as he becomes more and more part of the political furniture. His speeches were well-attended and his only clash with the media was a relatively good-humoured one - a denunciation of Nick Watt, who has recently moved from the Times to the Guardian, for over-emphasising the significance of his clear support for a united Ireland at the Tribune Rally. That speech, calling on the British Government and international opinion to become persuaders for a united Ireland, was badly received by the New Labour hierarchy. Adam Ingram mentioned in conversation that it had been very unhelpful at this time and Des McCartan said that other Ministers and officials had

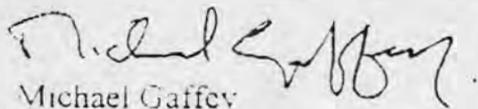
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expressed their deep irritation to him - Adams had been present at the invitation of New Labour and should not have abused their hospitality by using what they saw as uncompromising language. Throughout the week, however, Sinn Fein speakers stuck to a clear script, emphasising the impossibility of delivering on decommissioning in any form in advance of the formation of the shadow executive.

Overall, British journalists left the Conference with the view that the current problems will only be resolved by determined action by the British and Irish Governments, with an important role for General de Chastelain, but that some movement is possible despite the scripted positions taken by the Unionists and Sinn Fein during the week. Several noted the emphasis by Trimble on the need for creativity, a theme also followed by Mitchell McLaughlin in the Financial Times. Pearl Sagar at the Conference and the SDLP, whose delegates spoke of a suggestion subsequently aired in public by John Hume that a distinction might be made by the IRA between the handing in of Semtex and of guns.

It is unlikely that Northern Ireland will be as prominent an issue at the Conservative Party Conference in Bournemouth this week, where the media will be focusing on the Tories' internal difficulties and their apparent failure so far to begin to recover public support. David Trimble will be present and will speak on the opening day of the Conference.

Yours sincerely,


Michael Gaffey

cc Decian Kelly, Press Section