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20 May 1996

Mr S O hUiginn  
Second Secretary  
Anglo-Irish Division  
HQ

Dear Secretary

**Ancram in Washington: a conversation with a senior American official**

Mr Michael Habib, Minister- Counsellor at the US Embassy, was our guest to lunch yesterday at our home in Victoria Square. He mentioned that he has been briefed by telephone on a "series of meetings" which Michael Ancram has had in Washington with Senator Mitchell and others.

As regards Chairmanships in the negotiations:

- \* Ancram made no definite offer to Senator Mitchell
- \* Ancram "avoided mentioning" Strand Two but aired questions to do with the plenary, the business committee, and decommissioning
- \* Ancram made no reference to any alternative candidate for the Chairmanship of Strand Two.

The American perception is that on the issue of chairmanships, the British are "hiding behind the Unionists", for reasons which are not clear to Washington.

On decommissioning, Habib said that the key Unionist demand regarding the opening scenario is for a date to be fixed for a start to decommissioning, possibly some weeks into the talks. This view has some sympathy within the British

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Government. The Americans are awaiting the outcome of discussions within the British Government and between the British and ourselves.

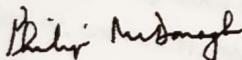
On the substance of the Unionist position, Habib said that Senator Mitchell in his report saw decommissioning as a confidence-building issue, one such issue among others. Those on the British and Unionist side who invoke Mitchell to justify their desire for a structured, parallel process of decommissioning, to be agreed at the outset of negotiations, are not accurately reflecting the Mitchell report. At the same time, arrangements agreed at the outset should leave the door open to some decommissioning happening during the process of negotiations.

Habib questioned me on our own support for Mitchell. Responding I referred to the overall benefits of involvement in the peace process by the US Administration and to Mitchell's personal credibility with the parties, including on the subject of decommissioning. I suggested that it would be a mistake, for example, to appear to counter-balance the American involvement by an equivalent involvement by any other third country.

Habib mentioned that the Americans have been made aware of British concerns about a possible major IRA attack in advance of a ceasefire. I am reporting separately on a conversation with a senior British official on this subject.

Habib also mentioned, for what it is worth, that in talking to the Americans some Northern Nationalists are complaining of their allegedly weakening links to the Irish Government and the consequent need for Washington to provide them with political reassurance. I of course drew Habib's attention to the significant results over time of our constructive engagement with London.

Yours sincerely



**Philip McDonagh**  
Counsellor