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BOSTON FOR PS/MICHAEL ANCRAM

SUBJECT: US/NORTHERN IRELAND: VISIT OF MICHAEL ANCRAM

SUMMARY

1. Administration, Congressional leaders and press briefed on peace process. Strong support for Government's efforts, but concern at slow progress of talks and (on the Hill) at continued exclusion of Sinn Fein. Lake on board on Hume/Adams and exit strategy for decommissioning.

DETAIL

2. Michael Ancram visited Washington on 25-26 September to brief US contacts on political developments. Lake and Soderberg (NSC), Bruce Morrison, Senators McCain and Dodd, and Congressmen Neal, King, and Joe Kennedy came to dinner. The Minister had separate meetings with Lake, Senators McCain, Kennedy/Dodd and Leahy, briefed journalists over lunch, called at State Department, and spoke to Chairman Gilman and four colleagues on the House International Relations Committee (HIRC) before leaving for Boston.

3. Michael Ancram concentrated on the following themes:

(a) There was no alternative to the talks process which was making slow, but real progress. Unionist leaders were, for the first time, negotiating with British and Irish government representatives in Belfast; agreement had been reached on rules of procedure far more rapidly than in 1991/92; London and

Dublin were cooperating effectively.

(b) The events of the summer had been damaging, but Drumcree needed to be set in context. If it hadn't happened there, it would have happened somewhere else. Who would have backed the Chief Constable if sticking to his original decision had caused massive loss of life? The legacy of mistrust was as bad on the Unionist as on the Nationalist side.

(c) Drumcree had caused moderates on both sides to move to more extreme positions. But it had also served as a reminder of what could happen if the talks collapsed. So the consequences for the process were not all bad.

(d) The seizures of bomb-making equipment on Monday had forestalled one, or several, terrorist outrages, but could make it more difficult to secure agreement between the parties on decommissioning. They had also heightened the risk that the IRA would seek to show that they were still in business, eg by mounting a "spectacular".

(e) Remarkably, public opinion in the UK had remained supportive of the peace process, despite the Docklands and Manchester bombs. A further atrocity could do grave damage to the process.

(f) Both governments hoped that Sinn Fein would re-qualify for inclusion in the talks by declaring a new, unequivocal ceasefire. But the primacy of the political process was clear: no one party would be able to hold the process hostage.

(g) The Government was determined to maintain momentum. But negotiations based on the principle of consent could not proceed more rapidly than consensus could be achieved.

(h) The contribution of Mitchell and his co-Chairmen had been outstanding. HMG was grateful for his efforts and (in answer to questions about Mitchell's future) hoped he would remain closely involved in the search for peace in Northern Ireland.

(i) Economic underpinning of the peace process remained vital. The Pittsburgh conference next month was a further valuable US contribution.

4. At my dinner, there was widespread admiration for the skill with which Ministers were sustaining the peace process, in difficult circumstances, but some concern at the apparently slow rate of progress. There were disagreements among Democrats (Dodd vs Joe Kennedy) and Republicans (McCain vs King) on both tactics and greenery. Lake reiterated the Administration's readiness to help, despite Mitchell's enforced absences. Morrison, just back from Belfast, said Monday's raids showed how close the IRA had got to destroying the talks.

NSC

5. At his meeting with Lake, Michael Ancram outlined Ministers' plans for moving on, in plenary, from procedure and decommissioning to issues of substance. Negotiations with the Unionists were at a delicate stage: the UUP had acquiesced in the Mitchell compromise on decommissioning at some political cost, and did not now wish to be 'hung out to dry'. It might be helpful, at a later stage, for Lake to press Trimble to accept our proposals; but not yet.

6. The Minister also briefed Lake, in confidence, on the Hume/Adams initiative. Hume's original bid had been unrealistic (Lake said that Adams understood that his demand for a firm timetable was not a runner), but the Government would be replying in terms which went a long way towards meeting Hume's concerns. Lake would receive a text shortly from No 10. The chances of the IRA responding with a new ceasefire were slim; but if those who claimed to be working for one thought it would help to have a restatement of existing Government policy, it was right to let them have it. Ministers would nevertheless need to spell out that they were not in the business of negotiating a restoration of the ceasefire. Lake agreed: to suggest otherwise would be bad tactics and political suicide.

7. Lake confirmed that he would speak at Georgetown University on 8 October about Northern Ireland. He would show us a text in advance. Michael Ancram explained that the Conservative Party Conference would be in progress at the time.

8. Lake reiterated his willingness to support the peace process, in whatever way we judged helpful. The Administration was greatly impressed by the Government's continuing

determination to move forward. He would continue to do what he could to bolster the Loyalists, and persuade them to maintain their ceasefire. He again asked whether something could be done for Loyalist prisoners. The Minister spelt out the dangers of politicising prison issues.

SENATE

9. McCain said that the Republican Party's disagreement with Clinton's decision to involve himself in N. Ireland (cf Baker at the San Diego Convention) should not be taken as a lack of interest. He, and Dole, were supportive of our efforts. But he wondered whether it had been right to leave the decisions on Drumcree to the Chief Constable. On the peace process, he could not see any further incentive for Adams - "already lionised in the north eastern United States" - to deliver a ceasefire. He regretted that there would not be more debate on foreign policy during the campaign. The polls, and reactions to Dole's efforts, showed that Americans weren't interested, except - briefly - when there was a major drama.

10. Ted Kennedy spoke to a Sinn Fein brief: what more could be done to reassure Nationalists/break down Unionist intransigence? More confidence-building (such as police reform) would help. Why not go over the heads of inflexible political leaders, and hold a referendum? Michael Ancram said that no-one should be encouraged to believe that there was an alternative to the talks process. Drumcree had shown that any attempt to go over the heads of political leaders was likely to result in even greater intransigence from the two communities. Dodd (also present) said he understood that a further IRA bomb attack could end the process altogether. For a variety of reasons, the talks were in a precarious state. Hence his and Kennedy's concern to inject a sense of urgency.

11. Michael Ancram thanked Leahy for his efforts over the years to secure US funding for the IFI. Leahy said he was glad to help, and was proud of the President's interest in Northern Ireland, and of Mitchell's role as Chairman of the talks. He, too, was concerned by the lack of momentum, and the risk of both sides returning to violence. The Minister said that governments could create the environment for a political settlement; but the parties had to make the deals.

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

12. At the meeting with the HIRC, the overall message was one of support for the government's efforts, and appreciation of the Minister's willingness to brief/listen. But Gilman, King, Neal and Payne nit-picked on HMG's response to the Mitchell report back in January; complained that there had been too little to show for 17 months of IRA ceasefire; and tut-tutted over Drumcree. Gilman thought Sinn Fein should be at the table with or without a ceasefire. Bereuter (Chairman of the British American Parliamentary Group) asked sensible questions.

COMMENT

13. Another useful exercise in bringing our US contacts up to date, and ensuring that the Administration remains supportive. Gilman apart, there was no sympathy for the Sinn Fein position: nor will there be as long as the IRA won't restore their ceasefire but the Loyalists maintain theirs. There were congratulations for the success of the security forces in Monday's raids; but no questions, even from the media, about the killing of the 'unarmed' IRA suspect.

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