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Late Edition

Clinton to support London line on Northern Ireland

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PRESIDENT Clinton is about to make a decisive shift in his policy on Northern Ireland, giving far more emphasis to backing the British and Irish Governments while at the same time slapping down Jean Kennedy Smith, the American Ambassador in Dublin. She is likely to be recalled within months.

Madeleine Albright, the US Secretary of State, has asked for talks with Sir Patrick Mayhew, the Northern Ireland Secretary, during her first visit to Britain in her new job later this month. American sources say that the Clinton Administration now wants to give visible support to London and Dublin while reducing White House involvement.

Ms Albright arrives on February 18 for two days of talks with John Major, Mr Mayhew and Malcolm Rifkind, the Foreign Secretary. Warren Christopher, her predecessor, never held separate discussions on Ireland with the Cabinet minister responsible.

Her decision is a clear signal that during the second Clinton Administration policy on Ireland will revert to the State Department, and that the National Security Council will be less involved. The clear message is that Mr Clinton, angered and disappointed by the ending of the IRA ceasefire, wants to keep his distance from the day-to-day negotiations on Northern Ireland.

The IRA yesterday ruled out a renewed ceasefire before the general election. At the same time, Scotland Yard said that there was "genuine cause for concern" about a terrorist strike on the mainland. In briefings held in Dublin to mark the first anniversary of the end of its ceasefire, the IRA said that a new truce was "most unlikely".

The second signal sent by Ms Albright's meeting is that Mrs Kennedy Smith has decisively lost influence, both in the White House and in the formulation of US policy on Ireland. Her championing of Gerry Adams, the Sinn Féin president, has caused intense embarrassment in the White House, where he is no longer welcome.

With the departure of Anthony Lake, National Security Adviser, and Nancy Soderberg, his deputy, from the National Security Council, Mrs Kennedy Smith has lost the support of the two people who championed the US attempt to formulate a more "green" Ireland policy that distanced itself from the official British position. And as American sources point out, she can no longer rely on her family connections to Senator Edward Kennedy, her brother.

President Clinton no longer has electoral need for the Irish lobby in America. Ms Albright is said to be impatient that attempts to steer a course closer to Mr Adams and John Hume, the SDLP leader, have backfired. American public opinion shifted decisively against the IRA after the Docklands bomb a year ago.

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American ambassadors normally serve for three years, and Mrs Kennedy Smith could therefore be expected to be replaced soon. American sources suggest that she may be gone within the next three months, to be replaced by a less partisan envoy.

George Mitchell, the former senator, is also expected to treatment of two American Embassy officials punished for opposing the granting of a visa to Mr Adams in February 1994. They were subsequently reinstated and promoted.

Ms Albright is likely to make clear to Sir Patrick that there will no longer be any attempt to bypass London in the formulation of American policy on Northern Ireland. Relations between the State Department and the embassy in Dublin reached breaking point over the Adams visa affair, with American supporters of Mrs Kennedy Smith contemptuously referring to the State Department as "10A Downing Street".

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George Mitchell, the former senator, is also expected to

step down soon as chairman of the multiparty talks at Stormont, despite widespread praise for his impartiality. These are expected to be suspended soon until after the election; the Americans fear that if they drag on during an election campaign, positions on all sides will harden and the gains made so far could be jeopardised. But the Americans have indicated that they are still willing to use their good offices to help to restart the peace process.