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FROM: QUENTIN THOMAS
Political Director
23 June 1997
QT/MR/114

c-PB

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE(L&B)

cc

PS/Mr Ingram(L&B)
PS/Mr Murphy(L&B)
PS/PUS(L&B)
PS/Sir David Fell
Mr Steele
Mr Bell
Mr Watkins
Mr Stephens
Mr Beeton
Mr Hill
Mr Brooker
Mr Perry
Mr Maccabe
Mr Warner
Mr Ray-Fax
Mr Budd Cab Office-Dur
Mr Holmes No.10-Dur
HMA Dublin-Fax
HMA Washington-Fax
Mr K R Tebbitt FCO-Fax
Mr Lamont RID/FCO-Fax

*File
 25/6.*

PHONE CALL FROM MARTIN McGUINNESS

As expected, Martin McGuinness phoned me this morning shortly before 11am. Alluding to our last phone call, he noted that the line was still working. He expressed appreciation for that and said he thought that continued contact was sensible. I in turn said that I had just been reading the Irish Times' report of his speech at Bodenstown. I saw that it had some positive elements, but I had not seen the full text. McGuinness offered to send it to me.

2. Having established that we were each ready to talk business, without further recrimination, McGuinness moved on to the substance. He referred to Adams' letter. He expected that I was aware of it. I said that indeed I was since it was to me that John Hume had faxed it. I said that it was difficult to

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take it seriously. It added new issues to those we had discussed. A number of them were issues of proper and genuine concern but they belonged to the Talks process. I noted that, having listed everything else, Adams ended up by referring to "social and economic issues". In other words it covered the whole waterfront of Government policy. It was on that basis that it was difficult to take it seriously as part of our clarificatory exchanges.

3. McGuinness did not disown it. He said a number of issues were "housekeeping" but the real issue was decommissioning.

4. Putting decommissioning to one side, I took him through some of the other issues. The Aide Memoire now gave them a timescale for entry which was sufficiently short to provoke criticism. It also explained in a purposive way what would happen after a ceasefire. Did McGuinness agree, I asked.

5. McGuinness said that while there were some points he would have discussed if we had been meeting he did not want to say more about this issue on the phone.

6. On the timeframe I said that we had mentioned May 1998. That set a pretty challenging timescale. I knew that they had suggested 6 months. But there was not much in this point was there? McGuinness replied that there was not. He himself had said publicly that the timescale of 6-9 months would do.

7. On confidence building measures, McGuinness recalled that at our meetings he had asked for substance. He referred to prison issues. I said that the text made clear where the Government was coming from. It was more specific and forward than the 10 October document. It provided the necessary clarification. But I did not see the Government negotiating these issues now, a number of which properly fell to be considered after a ceasefire and in substantive talks. McGuinness did not press the point further.

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8. This brought us to decommissioning. Where do we stand on it McGuinness asked.

9. Before saying something about decommissioning specifically, I said that there were some general points I should emphasise. The Government wanted Sinn Féin in the process, if it could be managed on proper terms. It also wanted the process to be successful: that is, it wanted a process in which there was a speedy and effective address to all the issues resulting in a comprehensive agreement acceptable to all the people. It was in that context that the Government approached decommissioning. It was of course a real issue (McGuinness interjected that 'yes' he understood that) and it would not go away. But the Government's approach, to which I thought I could add little more to what was in the Aide Memoire, was designed to create momentum and dynamic on both the political track and in respect of decommissioning.

10. I then ran through the two paragraphs on decommissioning in the Aide Memoire. I said that we were, we now thought, very close to agreement with our Irish colleagues.

11. McGuinness and I then had a long discussion about the nature of the process; the need to attract sufficient consensus; the Government's attitude to decommissioning and the ability of the Republican movement to help the process by its unequivocal demonstration that it had abandoned violence. I was anxious to stress that the Government's approach would be to attempt to carry things forward, and to avoid unnecessary or artificial blockages, while emphasising both that decommissioning was a genuine issue, for the Government as well as for others, and that the process required not only sufficient consensus in a mathematical sense, but more generally mutual confidence if it were to be carried forward. McGuinness made clear that he understood the nature of the process, while still being fearful that the Unionists

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could block the process on decommissioning. I agreed that that was indeed a possibility: but the approach we envisaged would not provide ready-made levers for them, or anyone else, to do so. Equally if there were simply no movement, or engagement on the issue, from Sinn Féin, then not only would the Unionist raise questions, but so would HMG. I recalled that Trimble himself had said that if he were persuaded that the Republican movement were serious then he would regard decommissioning as a secondary issue. I also brought out that the process might be held up at points on any issue, and by any participant, including Sinn Féin.

12. During this exchange we had a digression about sufficient consensus. McGuinness noted that sufficient consensus could be achieved without Sinn Féin. I agreed that this was the case. I also expressed the view that a number of the big players would be anxious to carry Sinn Féin along if that were at all possible. I instanced the SDLP and the Irish Government. I also noted that, even if a change to Rules of Procedure was sensible or appropriate, there was a downside to doing so. The present rule at least enabled forward movement to be achieved against objections from Dr Paisley and Mr McCartney. A change to the rule to give Sinn Féin a blocking vote would strengthen the position of others also.

13. McGuinness brought our conversation to an end on the stated ground that someone had come to his door. (Some banging had indeed earlier been audible.) But it may be he had taken the exchange as far as he wished for the moment. Our conversation had by then lasted about 25 minutes.

14. He said he would think about what had been said and might phone again.

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15. During the conversation McGuinness alluded to the idea of a further meeting but he never pressed it to the point where I had to respond specifically. My own view is that a telephone call of this kind was in any case more apt for the kind of low level clarification which is all we now envisage.

(Signed: Quentin Thomas)

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