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SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND

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cc COS
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David Trimble Esq MP
House of Commons
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27 August 1997

Dear David

You received yesterday evening a copy of the Agreement establishing the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning which I subsequently signed with Ray Burke, and we spoke this morning about the Agreement and the progress we are making in ensuring that the new body is fully operational, on the lines set out in the Government's joint note to the Plenary of 16 July, alongside the start of substantive negotiations on 15 September. I am writing now to follow up that conversation.

The ceremony last night marked a key step in ensuring that the Commission will be capable of starting full operations next month. This is concrete evidence of the commitment of both Governments to the earliest possible decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. You are I know concerned that there should be no gaps in the available machinery which would stop us from achieving that goal. I can assure you that both Governments are completely determined to ensure that the machinery of the Commission is in place and fully operational alongside the start of substantive negotiations on 15 September, which reflects the views of the International Body, who envisaged mutual progress on political issues and decommissioning helping to create a progressive pattern of mounting trust and confidence. We are also clear that we will give immediate effect to an appropriate scheme for

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decommissioning as soon as any paramilitary organisation accepts the need to begin this process, but it is impossible at this point to specify when actual decommissioning will start.

However, should I decide that Sinn Fein meets the requirements set out in the legislation and therefore invite it to nominate a negotiating team - Sinn Fein's participation in the negotiations will require it to affirm its total and absolute commitment to the International Body's principles of democracy and non-violence. These of course incorporate a binding commitment to the total and verifiable disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. Sinn Fein's affirmation of commitment to the principles would therefore reinforce the imperatives on it to bring about the earliest possible decommissioning of all illegal weapons. The two Governments have also proposed that the Commission should be invited to draw attention to any case in which a participant has failed to engage with the Commission in accordance with the proposed commitment to work constructively and in good faith with the Commission to carry out its role.

In conclusion, could I make two points. First, there has been no undue delay in setting up the Commission. You have, I think, suggested that the target dates set out in the 16 July speaking notes have not been achieved - but those dates were, of course, dependent on agreement by the Talks participants to the Government's joint paper of 25 June. When that agreement by sufficient consensus was not forthcoming, there was inevitably an effect on progress. But the key point is that both Governments are fully committed to the Commission being in a position to commence work on a full

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operational basis alongside the start of substantive negotiations on 15 September. And we are implementing that commitment by, for example, identifying with the US, Canadian and Finnish Governments a range of experienced and qualified potential members of the Commission. We are establishing offices for the Commission in Belfast and Dublin. And we are ensuring that they will have appropriate privileges, immunities and resources.

Second, the two Governments and their security forces will of course be maintaining their efforts to seize all illegal weapons. But the decommissioning process, in its nature, requires the co-operation of the paramilitary organisations concerned. Realistically, that is only likely to be forthcoming in the context of meaningful and inclusive political negotiations. Of course, that leads to an understandable concern that the latent threat of the weaponry remaining in possession of the organisations concerned could be used in an attempt to influence the course of the negotiations. But I believe that the arrangements set out in the joint paper of 25 June and the 16 July amplification fully meet that anxiety. The establishment of the Decommissioning Commission is a very important step in implementing those safeguards. I hope you will accept that it does address the concerns you feel.

I look forward to seeing you at the meeting with the Prime Minister tomorrow, when we will have an opportunity to discuss these matters further.

Marjorie

MARJORIE MOWLAM

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