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From the Principal Private Secretary

6 February 1998

Joe Kern

**WASHINGTON VISIT: BREAKFAST WITH
CONGRESSIONAL IRISH LOBBY, 5 FEBRUARY**

Sir Christopher Meyer hosted a breakfast meeting for the Prime Minister with the major congressional players on the Irish-American side, including Kennedy, Dodd, King, Leahy, Manton, Moynihan, Morrison, Neal and Joe Kennedy. The Home Secretary was also there.

The Prime Minister spoke along the lines of the attached text, which was subsequently circulated to the press. Kennedy started the questions. He was impressed by the Government's policy on Northern Ireland, and in particular by the decision on Bloody Sunday. He had watched the Parliamentary exchanges on this with great interest. He wondered how far there was a problem of expectations. How easily could a settlement falling short of a united Ireland be sold in a referendum campaign? The Prime Minister said that if there were a popular vote in favour of such a settlement in both North and South, that would produce a clear result. Any settlement would of course have to include meaningful North-South structures and action on the equality issues. He thought the nature of the issues was changing, as the relationship between Britain and the Republic of Ireland changed, and the Republic itself became a go-ahead, open and modern society. In these circumstances, national boundaries obviously became less relevant over time.

Neal also praised the Government's decision on Bloody Sunday. The Government had got everything right so far. However he feared that a Unionist veto would once again be applied at a critical juncture, not least judging by recent comments by Trimble. How could this hurdle be overcome? The Prime Minister said that the Unionist community felt isolated in many ways. The Irish Government supported the Nationalist side, whereas the British Government obviously had to take account of both communities. This led the Unionists to tend to resist all change. The important thing about the Propositions paper was that the Unionists had signed up to North-South structures. There was an obvious presentational dilemma in all this, since the two sides needed to present any outcome in different ways. But the differences of substance between them were

- 2 -

not as great as often thought. The need was therefore to get the details sorted out, try to ignore the presentational differences as much as possible, and produce a period of stability to enable the two communities to work together.

Leahy also praised the Government's approach. But he was worried that without economic improvement, there would be a tendency to fall back on the old ways. The Prime Minister said that the key to this was inward investment. Once there was a good prospect of lasting peace, he was confident this would flow in. There was also the need to nurture a new generation of political leaders.

King stressed the importance of strong executive powers for North-South bodies. The refusal of Trimble to engage with Adams and McGuinness, although he had been quite happy to talk to Billy Wright, was also a problem. The Prime Minister agreed that engagement all round was desirable. Sinn Fein could help by accepting the consent principle, in line with all the other parties, North and South. He believed that Adams and McGuinness wanted to stay on the political path but we should not be starry eyed about their organisation. There was a long history of terrorism, which would be hard to put behind them. Acceptance by Sinn Fein of consent would make a huge difference.

Moynihan raised in an ironic way the proposed Council of the Isles. What was the aim of this gathering of the Celtic fringe? The Prime Minister explained that the idea was to create a framework whereby all the constituent parts of the United Kingdom and the Republic had a relationship with each other.

Dodd paid tribute to the Government, in particular Dr Mowlam. Recent progress was almost unimaginable. He had hoped that Trimble would turn out to be the Hume of the Unionists, but this hope had been disappointed so far. He was also grateful for the Government's work on bringing prisoners closer to their families. The Prime Minister said we had done what we could on prisoners. As far as Trimble was concerned, he had come a good deal further than many Unionists wanted him to, for example accepting North-South structures. People on the US side could help enormously by making clear that they understood the position of the Unionists. It was important to remember that Trimble was under constant attack from Paisley and McCartney, so that giving comfort to the Ulster Unionists was vital.

Joe Kennedy thanked the Government for its efforts so far, and called for confidence-building measures, eg over prisoners and British military presence, to be continued. He was also concerned about the protection of minority rights. The Prime Minister said that the parties were looking at mechanisms to do this, and we

- 3 -

were committed to the protection of the rights of both communities. But the best guarantee in the end was the stability of a settlement and peace.

Morrison said that the Irish American community was indebted to the Prime Minister for his grasp of the issues and the time he had devoted to Northern Ireland. Failure now was almost unimaginable. The key was to end the violence as a destructive force by draining all political legitimacy from it. This meant not just new structures flowing from a settlement, but also change on the ground in areas like the NIO, the RUC and the courts. The Prime Minister said that we would continue measures to build confidence. We would also press the Unionists to engage with Sinn Fein. But the pressure on Sinn Fein not to go back to violence was also important. Suggestions that the IRA might decide to go back to violence in March were very destabilising. There could be absolutely no justification for this, now that a legitimate political process was underway.

The Home Secretary explained the action we had already taken on prisoner transfers. The six left in Britain were those for whom whole life tariffs had been set. The Irish system had difficulty in dealing with this, but he was working closely with the Irish Justice Minister. He was also looking carefully at the case of Roisin McAliskey, to see if she was psychologically fit to be transferred to Germany. In general, we took enormous care to ensure fair and just decisions in such cases.

Manton echoed the appreciation of others for the Government's efforts. He wondered whether the DUP would be able to defeat a settlement proposal in a referendum. The Prime Minister said he could not be sure. It depended on whether a settlement could be sold to people over the heads of their political leaders. But the DUP had no alternative to offer. The roots of Unionist resistance to change went deep and were hard to deal with. But he thought it important to keep open his own lines of communication with Paisley. Again this illustrated the difficulties of the position of Trimble, who had to be an advocate of change without making himself vulnerable to charges of betrayal.

Kennedy wound up the meeting by saying that there had to be a complete rejection of violence. A clear message should be sent that there should be no return to violence.

Comment

This was a notably successful occasion. The already benevolent mood of those present towards us was further strengthened by the open approach of the Prime Minister and his clear grasp of the issues. It was also a useful opportunity to

- 4 -

get across some important messages, notably on the need to keep up the pressure on Sinn Fein not to go back to violence, and on the need for understanding of Trimble's position and contact with him. Feedback from those present at the breakfast has been universally favourable.

I am copying this to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir Christopher Meyer (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).

Yours

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