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The Rt Hon Dr Marjorie Mowlam MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Northern Ireland Office
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24th March 1998

Dear Dr Mowlam

Thank you for your letter of 19th March. I did indeed have a very enjoyable time and was almost overwhelmed by the hospitality of the Attorney General and his friends. What was intended as a private visit transpired to be a well organised exercise by the Irish and I met with a considerable number of the David Byrne's political and official colleagues. I thought it might be worth putting on paper fairly briefly some of the impressions I had from speaking to David and his colleagues in the hope that they may of interest or use to you.

Lunch was at the Attorney General's recently refurbished office where, as well as David Byrne, I met Dermot Gallagher, Assistant Secretary at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Tim Dalton from the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform and James Hamilton, Senior Legal Assistant at the Attorney's office. Much of the conversation centred on the progress of the peace talks which I listened to with interest. Gallagher was strongly of the view that Mr Trimble was not able to make any concessions of substance until the last twelve hours or so as he had to look permanently over his shoulder. Tim Dalton thought that this had great dangers as he regarded the Adams/Sinn Fein/IRA position as being extremely volatile and could well get out of control. When conversation turned to broader issues such as the problems of immigration and our budget I was in a much stronger position.

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At the match I was told I would be meeting the Taoiseach for a cup of tea. I did but only pleasantries were exchanged. There were a number of other visitors there such as Ronnie Flanagan and the Chief Commissioner of the Garda - who were together - and the Chief Justice etc. Nothing of any great consequence was said. There were naturally a number of Welshmen there from ex Lord Justice Tasker Watkins to the President of the IRFU. Ron Davies was there too.

In the evening I was entertained to dinner at the Attorney General's home. Gathered there were a number of Irish people including Ken Whittaker, the former Secretary of Finance who had been Chief Adviser to the Taoiseach during his talks with de Gaulle at the time of the Irish/British approach to join the EEC. Mrs Justice Susan Denham and her husband as well as Deputy Brian Lenehan and his wife. Martin Manseargh made the numbers up to ten. I got the impression that the main purpose of the dinner was for me to meet with Manseargh. I was put to sit next to him and had a most interesting dinner which went on for a considerable time.

My clear impressions were

- (a) immense cordiality and good will towards us
- (b) an impression of great rapport with the Government, yourself in particular and the AG's belief that Tony and the Taoiseach got on so well because they were of the same generation and had the same approach to problems. The Attorney is a close personal friend of the Taoiseach and sees him three times a week. Indeed the Taoiseach's last message to him was "I will see you on Monday morning regarding some problem".
- (c) a strong belief that there would be referendums on or around 14 May.
- (d) the only clear message I had from Manseargh was the importance they attached to there being meaningful proposals for the joint Executive Council. This would be vital to their ability to sell amendments to Articles 2 and 3 of their Constitution in the referendum. I do hope I have got most of these references right but that was the point that they came back to repeatedly.

I have got on well with David Byrne and made a point of going to Dublin to meet him and have looked after him when he was in London. I think it is a point appreciated on both sides that if and when there are difficulties we can lift the telephone and get a meeting of minds. This seems to be working. If it

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would help matters in any way, I would be delighted, in my capacity as Attorney General for Northern Ireland, to invite him to Belfast on a visit. I look to you for guidance on whether and when such a visit might be helpful or appropriate.

All in all it was an extremely successful visit and the fact that Wales triumphed - which I am sure was not laid on for my benefit, but merit prevailed - added to the pleasure.

Deborah Hermer

John Morris QC

(signed in his absence by his Private Secretary)

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