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FROM: PETER N BELL  
BRITISH SECRETARY  
30 SEPTEMBER 1998

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cc: See Distribution List

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WHERE WE ARE NOW WITH THE IRISH

Summary

Liaison Group fixed for tomorrow when further efforts will be made to bridge the crevasse on decommissioning/executive formation. The Irish know in detail where we stand (more on modalities and timescales); we know where the Irish stand (although they might wish it otherwise, no 'give' in the Republican position). The Secretariat is also engaged in following up several areas identified for further possible North/South co-operation during the Secretary of State's successful visit to Dublin last week.

Decommissioning/Executive formation

2. I took the opportunity to have another go this morning at my Irish colleagues by explaining that John Holmes' reaction (see his letter of yesterday to Nick Perry) to the Irish paper 'Implementation of the Agreement: possible steps in making progress' was (independently) virtually identical to my own, and that we and the Americans were as one in believing that the Republicans simply had to offer something, and what that something might be. All elements of the Irish system must now have got our message very loud and clear. So all the building blocks seem to be on the table; unfortunately there is a shortage of good, new ideas as to how to make the necessary bridge out of them. We can explore tomorrow in the light of today's discussions in Blackpool (when we should not forget - a point laboured to me, with evidence, today by David Ferguson - David Trimble's room for manoeuvre remains minimal).

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Liaison Group

3. This points to a meeting tomorrow (1630 hours, Iveagh House) with the following (now agreed) agenda (and your own plan of campaign which we need to discuss either in a pre-brief in Dublin or after PUS' Co-ordinating Meeting tomorrow):

- News from the Road (aka 'Blackpool Illuminations');
- 'Making Progress':
  - decommissioning/executive formation;
  - North/South;
- Northern Ireland Bill;
- Any Other Business.

Secretary of State's visit to Dublin

4. Most of our discussions dwelt, however, on our gains from the Secretary of State's exceptionally successful visit last week to Dublin. I dwelt on her own favourable assessment; the rapport she had established with all her Ministerial contacts, from the Taoiseach downwards ('everyone gets on with him', says David); and the warmth of the reception of her IOD speech. I also emphasised her continuing commitment to make sensible progress, in the interests of both jurisdictions in North/South co-operation, even in areas which will become the responsibility of North/South institutions. So there need, nor should not be any hanging back on the Southern side - not least on the part of Irish Departmental Officials (who may not hear the Taoiseach's message as clearly as they ought).

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My working text was Nick Perry's detailed note of 25 September (addressed to Julie Mapstone). This put me in the agreeable position of being able to explain to David Donoghue what his own Ministers were up to - as well as what 'e-coms' meant, a concept which does not yet appear to have reached the DFA. Thus, very briefly, we took note:

- of the work in hand between DED over possible areas of co-operation in preparing for Irish entry into EMU;
- our undertaking to respond swiftly, in response to the promised arrival of Irish proposals for developing a 'North/South' IT corridor;
- awaited with interest promised Irish proposals in respect of 'e-com';
- with Irish Officials, we should also explore further how much mutual assistance would be possible if the 'millennium bug' caused a serious systems failure in a key amenity;
- we were awaiting details from Ms de Valera who to contact in order to identify possible joint projects for the millennium celebrations;
- the desirability, in principle, but the sensitivities in practice of both North/South co-operation on Irish language issues. (I stressed Minister O Cuiv's own speculation that the 'Columcille' project, also involving Scots Gaelic, might be one way forward as well as the Secretary of State's own feeling that this work might best be taken forward under the auspices of the BIC. At this, David Donoghue raised an eyebrow - seeing this as an exclusively North/South matter. (This may illustrate how we need to work to educate the Irish Side, and the DFA in particular, to raise their horizons beyond this island);
- our Embassy was providing an initial report by the end of what is now this week, on areas of current and potential co-operation in the Arts as a basis for

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discussion between the appropriate Government Departments etc in both North and South (David Donoghue's speculation was that, in due course, this might be a suitable area for an implementation body);

- the Irish registered the Secretary of State's observation that inland waterways was one of the areas suggested in the Agreement as a possible North/South body, but that we should re-visit the subject if it was not one of the areas picked up by the 'shadow institutions' for eventual implementation.

Broadcasting

6. Owing to our recent, fairly lengthy exchanges on broadcasting in the Secretariat, we discussed this item in a little more detail. I took my colleague verbatim through the relevant portion of Nick Perry's note, in which it appeared to me that Ms de Valera was primarily concerned to ensure that 'reciprocity' did not only work in one direction - namely in the Republic, but not in our jurisdiction. (This seems to me a mirror image of the UTV concern that, unless such 'reciprocity' is guaranteed in our jurisdiction, reciprocity in the South - from which they will benefit commercially - may not take place either.) Ms de Valera, I explained, would be writing very soon with further details of proposed Irish legislation and the scope they saw for future co-operation.

7. Given the interest of both sides in making progress in this area, and having regard to the current spat of UTV and RTE as well, the background of the enhancement of the signal from Clermont Carn (on both of which I have made recent recommendations - see my submission of 22 September), I believe Mr Brooker should, in collaboration with DCMS colleagues, as well as the Secretariat, ensure that there are handled in ways that result - as I believe it ought - in a 'win/win' for both sides, rather than, as remains my recurrent fear, given bureaucratic arrangements in London, a less satisfactory outcome. (Since dictating this, I have seen David Kyle's note of 30 September.) I hope IPL will be able to formulate (in collaboration) what we currently lack - a handling plan for all the linked developments on the broadcasting front.

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Further action

8. David Donoghue will be exploring with his colleagues in Dublin, where appropriate, how best progress can be taken forward (though the broadcasting issue is one which, on previous form, he has the greatest interest and knowledge). (These are all areas where the DFA political interest and ours march reasonably well together.) We will be taking stock ourselves of progress next week. Otherwise, the detailed action seems to lie first where it is ascribed in Nick Perry's own note. (I shall be in touch separately with Mrs Brown about the 'millennium bug'.)

9. Second, we shall be following up the wider politics of North/Southery in Dublin tomorrow by which time John Fisher will have circulated a note of today's further meeting between the Irish, ourselves and the First Minister/Deputy First Ministers' staff. (One of the key messages to reinforce tomorrow - I can expand orally - will be discouraging the Irish from trying to get us to 'sort things' and to bring Trimble into what they consider wiser courses, and to encourage the Deputy First Minister to advance his own ideas more effectively (including by submitting them for technical appraisal). Wally Kirwan will probably be a more receptive recipient of our views generally than the DFA.)

*Signed:*

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