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From: John McKervill
Political Affairs Division
2 September 1996

cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B
PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B
PS/PUS (B&L) - B
PS/Mr Fell - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Leach - B
Mr Hill - B
Mr Stephens - B

1. cc Mr Lavery
6. cc Mr Carson
Mr. J. ...
Mr. J. ...
Mr. J. ...
argues will.

RECEIVED - 5 SEP 1996
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Mr Maccabe

the
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DISCUSSION WITH JOE BYRNE, SDLP VICE-CHAIRMAN

I had lunch on Friday with Joe Byrne, SDLP vice-chairman and elected Forum member. Perhaps inevitably most of our discussion centered on the events surrounding Drumcree, during which he confirmed the deep bitterness and anger of nationalists towards the Government and the RUC. He argued that the message from the decision to allow the Orange Order down the Garvaghy Road and the less than even-handed policing of events was that nationalists were second class citizens. Sinn Fein's support had increased at a time when their leaders should have been under pressure following the murder of Garda McCabe and the Manchester bomb. He felt now that the only hope of his party restoring its support was very early and substantive progress in the talks.

2. Following the SDLP's standard line he said it was the responsibility of the two Governments to take a firm grip of the talks and not let the negotiations get bogged down in further wrangling over decommissioning which, post Drumcree, he claimed, was no longer a possibility. I said that the Government shared his aim but much depended on the attitude of the Unionists in the talks. He acknowledged this, but held little hope that a way round the problem

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of decommissioning could easily be found. Much depended on whether the Unionists were serious about the negotiations: he remained to be convinced they were.

3. On Sinn Fein's position, he saw no prospect of a new ceasefire until the talks really started to show some progress. He however looked forward to Sinn Fein joining the talks eventually as he felt that there, just as in the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation, their inability to engage in political negotiations would be exposed, to the SDLP's benefit.

4. One topic which required early consideration in the talks was policing. The appointment of Ronnie Flanagan as Chief Constable was welcome news but reform was needed if the RUC was to gain the acceptance of even moderate nationalists. Encouragingly he has still maintained his good relationship with the local RUC and last week had a two hour conversation with the local Chief Inspector in the police station.

5. There is no significance to be attached to the fact that some of the elected SDLP Forum members (including himself) have not yet sent in letters of resignation, he told me. The people concerned had just not got round to sending them in. Although he had been absent from the party Council meeting which took the decision to resign from the Forum, he said that the decision had not been unanimous. Some, including Hume, had argued against resigning, but the more hard-line members had won the day. Having taken the decision to resign, he confirmed that there was absolutely no hope of his party returning.

6. I raised with him the previous weekend's press speculation about an electoral pact with Sinn Fein. An ardent opponent of a pact, he still felt that a majority in the party would still be opposed although, post Drumcree, the outcome of a vote would be much closer. He said it was virtually inevitable that the issue would have to be addressed at the Party Conference in November, the last

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one before the General Election. Byrne still maintains that his party should seek to maintain some distance between it and Sinn Fein and he regretted that in the wake of Drumcree, some of his party colleagues had shared public platforms with Sinn Fein leaders. He had refused point blank a Sinn Fein request to share a platform at a rally in Omagh.

7. He also felt the SDLP in Londonderry had made a mistake in its treatment of the Mayor, Richard Dallas. He claimed that Mark Durkan now privately acknowledged this and that Hume had always been opposed because of the damaging image of the city it would portray. By coincidence, Durkan telephoned me later in the day about a separate matter and in the course of our discussion said that following the judicial review hearing, which I understand is scheduled for 9 September, the Council may restore the mayoral trappings to Dallas. Until the review hearing nothing could be done as the Council feared that any warm noises could be misrepresented by Dallas' lawyers in court. It is encouraging to see that Durkan at least is keen to see the matter resolved.

8. Finally it is difficult to exaggerate the degree of opposition in Omagh to the Government's plan to reorganise the Education Boards. Byrne clearly sees a plot to "Easternise" the Province at the expense of the West. People in Omagh would have to travel miles to attend one of the six "golden" hospitals. The Western Education Board was being scrapped, and there had been no inward investment project in the area for at least 20 years. It was difficult, he argued, to convince his constituents that the west was getting a fair deal. I did not disclose that Omagh was being earmarked for the Headquarters of the Southern Education Board!

(Signed)

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