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FROM: PETER N BELL
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To see - for a laugh

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Mr Stephens

BRITISH-IRISH ASSOCIATION, ST ANNE'S OXFORD - 11-13 SEPTEMBER

Summary

Best ever? David Trimble emphasised the very tight political constraints under which he operated; Seamus Mallon highlighted the need for a 'new politics' in which, without sacrificing ultimate aspirations, politicians of all hues must collaborate on tackling basic socio-economic problems; the sympathies of an arguably 'post-nationalist' Irish Republic extended to greenish rhetoric, but not to doing anything to damage the economic interests of their own State; on both the Unionist and Sinn Féin sides, however, there seemed a recognition of a pressing political need to find their way round the decommissioning impasse. [REDACTED] Mr Murphy spoke well; John A Murphy provided his usual cabaret. Good crack.

(A bit) more detail

2. After explaining that I would write an account of the conference, various colleagues have then gone on to fell a few forests on their own account. I shall not recapitulate their narratives (not to all) - concentrating instead on points that impressed me. The first was **the atmosphere**: never had the Association met in such a favourable context. Sir D Goodall accordingly saw the need for a 'continuity BIA' after David Trimble had suggested, amongst other barbs at the predominantly non-Trimbalistas who predominate in the Association, that the BIA was another of those "three letter groupings" that should decommission and wind itself up. (Others might think that the UUP itself fell into this category) (The view we take on this is, of course, relevant to our response to

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Sir Goodall's lobbying for funds. Personally, I share Joe Pilling's view, that while the BIA may also be past its glory years, it is not yet time for the funeral.)

3. My second strongest impression was from **David Trimble** who advertised his own opening address not as a speech but as a few disconnected remarks, in which, however, either by accident or design he provided informally, one of the two best formal addresses of the conference. His main themes, which I found persuasive (though a little self serving) included:

- Sinn Féin were acceptable in an administration to Unionists provided they really, really meant peace - in this context the number of times he avoided the d-word was noteworthy;
- another pointed observation that there would have been no Agreement without the Prime Minister's deep personal commitment;
- a similar recognition, that only with Labour and its more flexible constitutional policies, could the no less necessary BIC (and therefore the Agreement) have been established, into whose embrace he welcomed both the Scots and the Republic; and,
- we were now engaged on a 'white knuckle ride'.

4. The problems, he gave us to understand, had only begun. Those gentle days of negotiating the Agreement had passed. Only by the slenderest of majorities had Unionists (as distinct from Protestants) voted 'yes' in the Referendum, or for pro-Agreement candidates in the elections. This, and the fact that their necessary confidence in Sinn Féin did not currently exist, created extreme political difficulties for him. This was not a tendentious interpretation: it was, he emphasised, with passion, 'political reality'. And, as an example of the tension still existing in the working class in particular, he highlighted the current agonies of Portadown (not helped, in his view, by the Parades Commission of whose alleged failure to mediate and conciliate, as opposed to making some (bad) judgements, he

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was highly critical). Nevertheless, he felt able to conclude on an upbeat note: the underlying trend in Northern Ireland was positive; Northern Ireland was quite different from the Northern Ireland of 25 years ago.

5. **Mr Mallon's** address was less evidently haunted by the still walking undead. Although for him 'it was the best of times and the worst of times', it was on the former that he concentrated - even while recognising that politicians would now acquire real (and painful) responsibilities. They would no longer be in the position of a permanent opposition; they would have to work hard and collaboratively with other politicians of radically different political traditions; and no-one but themselves would be responsible for their own failures. This called, not for the abandonment of personal convictions - Mallon would always remain an Irish nationalist - but the priority would be co-ordinating programmes, devising new initiatives, promoting talent, building, in short, 'the shining city'. All this would, amongst other things, be a major culture shock for the NICS. (Yes!)

6. Compared with his emphasis on making the 'new Northern Ireland' work, his genuflections to both North/South bodies ('more than symbolic') and the BIC could have seemed almost ritualistic.

The workshops

7. A feature of the BIA is the workshops which give the chattering classes opportunities to indulge their favourite vice. Unfortunately, I missed one of my own owing to a clandestine date with a very old friend of mine - we go back to MECAS in the Lebanon in the late '60s - who will be our next Ambassador in Dublin, a colourful and bonhomous activist with whom we shall have a relationship that will be 'interesting', whether in the Chinese sense or not remains to be seen. It will certainly be different.

8. Two themes are perhaps worth recording:

- **Barbara de Brun's** reluctance to parrot a hard Sinn Féin line, and her recognition, picked up separately by both Bill Jeffrey and myself, that both

Sinn Féin and the UUP shared a common political problem over decommissioning which it was in the interests of both parties to resolve. (David Hill and George Fergusson have reported similar impressions of Ms de Brun elsewhere.) She at any rate is certainly open to persuasion: or at least prepared to purchase a novel on my advice (Kate Atkinson: 'Behind the Scenes at the Museum', an hysterical saga of a dysfunctional Yorkshire shop-keeping family. Brilliant); and,

- **North/South co-operation.** After being asked by sceptics to demonstrate any examples of North/South co-operation which the proverbial man in the street would recognise, I argued that intense co-operation at all levels (involving several Departments North and south and the two police forces) both in producing the Agreement and on security co-operation surely counted? At the day to day level, I was consistently surprised at the closeness between Northern Ireland Civil Servants and their Dublin counterparts, even when, as in the case of the DED and IDB, their Southern counterparts were their rivals. On the other hand, I did not disguise, after touching base with Lord Dubs and Gerry Loughran, the political obstacles, from a Southern point of view, which need tackling: Irish behaviour, (at least initially) on BSE, the Hague Preference, electricity generation was arguably less than might have been expected and given that green rhetoric. There was real work to be done in Strand II (Northern politicians of all allegiances should take note.)

9. This last complemented **Professor Murphy's** analysis, speaking on the basis of floridly detailed genealogical research as a man of 'pure Irish blood - only a little diluted by alcohol', that the Republic was a 'post-nationalist state'; all its priorities since independence had been focused on building up that state, often - and most obviously in the case of de Valera - at the price of entrenching partition, whatever the rhetoric. It was not, surprising therefore, that in the present dispensation, the Southern administration would be reluctant to countenance the developments which were not to their specific benefit, and that the true

impact of North/South co-operation might even be more painful for the South (where it had been barely discussed) than for the North (where it was emotionally aspired to - by some).

10.

[REDACTED] - and not least because it contrasted so sharply with **Mr Murphy's** own remarks around the theme of 'of course there are difficult problems ahead, but who would ever have thought we'd have got so far'. This caught well the optimistic mood of the Conference and was universally well received. (Only **Barbara de Brun** was later to take exception to the Minister's suggestion that Martin McGuinness might be representing the IRA rather than Sinn Féin in his dialogue with the Decommissioning Commission Heaven forbid.)

10. Of the Sunday morning session, you have seen David Hill's detailed account of what he saw as a 'very interesting panel discussion' encapsulating the debate which had permeated the Conference of the relationship between **decommissioning** and the formation of a Shadow Executive. With his verdict that, within their political constraints, both sides were genuinely trying to resolve the problem, I do not dissent (though I still do not see the way through), nor with his assessment that the UUP were also majoring on their desire to find a way forward on North/South bodies before a Shadow Executive was formed (which seems increasingly 'not on' for the Irish and Mr Mallon). I also agree that Barbara de Brun emerged from this session, as from the Conference as a whole, with a greatly enhanced reputation as a warm human being, as opposed to a homicidal republican apparatchik, with whom one could do serious business. The way she made sport with the question sometimes put to her and designed to determine whether Sinn Féin could really work in government ("would you be prepared to close hospitals?") was one of the gems of the Conference - as was John A Murphy's heroic and successful effort to wake everyone up towards the end of the discussion, not least by his robust all Irish defense of the phrase 'British Isles'.

11 But one should not pass over on the same morning the efforts of the messianic duo of **Professors Boyle and Hadden**, to share their vision of the constitutional renewal of relationships within 'these Islands/the British Isles/the British-Irish Isles' which was foreshadowed by the **BIC**, to say nothing of new legal protection for **human rights** which would keep the Professors and their legal colleagues in profitable business for many, many years to come. The basic theme of their presentation, and much of the discussion from the floor, was the creation of a new 'post-colonial' relationship in the British Isles (which was non-threatening, nor a project to create a new unitary state, and for which the Nordic Council in particular set a useful precedent).

12. We undoubtedly live in a period when the rules of the constitutional game are in the process of radical revision. But sceptical voices were to be heard: Joe Pilling, in public, could ask what was the advantage, in all the variable constitutional geometry, for England: Quentin Thomas, in private, had reservations about the Nordic Council model whose 'small Secretariat' had some 80 staff, to say nothing of around 17 working groups reflecting the activities of civil society in the Scandinavian world.

Summing up

13. Overall, a most stimulating and unusually worthwhile occasion. You missed a good do. The fact that I did not agree with all the speakers, nor stood up to give testimony after Boyle and Hadden had spoken, does not mean that I was not roused (at least once this year) from bureaucratic slumber. Which reinforces the judgement with which I began: the BIA still has something to offer.

Signed:
P N BELL

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01232 427532