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13 May 1998

Mr Dermot Gallagher
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
HQ

Dear Secretary

Conversations with Unionists at the House of Commons

I have just returned from the House of Commons where I observed Northern Ireland and Prime Minister's Questions - on which Helen Blake is reporting separately.

I encountered John Taylor in the Lobby. Taylor told me that since his conversation with me this morning he has spoken with David Trimble and has been to a degree reassured. Trimble believes that Unionist opinion is "levelling out". At an agricultural show in Balmoral yesterday Trimble spoke to a number of voters and found that a strong majority on the Unionist side intended to vote yes.

I responded that to judge by the position of the Presbyterian Church there are a lot of sensible people who must be likely in the end to support the Agreement. Taylor said that the problem is in large housing estates where hardly anyone ever sets foot in a church. The Unionist working class vote is still very uncertain.

Taylor said that the Prime Minister's statement this afternoon was "robust".

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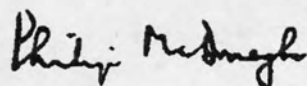
I separately encountered some of David Trimble's advisers. They said they are more hopeful than previously about a substantial yes vote on the Unionist side. Mention was made, in confidence, of a press conference being planned for Tuesday next at which if all goes well Jeffrey Donaldson, Arlene Foster, Viscount Cranborne, Kate Hoey and others will come out in favour of a yes vote. The trigger for this is to be a statement to be made by the Prime Minister on his visit to Northern Ireland tomorrow.

I asked what the Prime Minister is expected to say. I was informed that he will have reassuring words for the RUC and prison officers (and will have a separate meeting with prison officers), that he will promise not to complete the programme of prison releases until the provisions of the Agreement on decommissioning are respected and that he will make general comments which could not unfairly be characterised as "Balmoral mark II", although with less emphasis than last May on his own attitude to the Union. Although Blair is expected to be firm on compliance with the Agreement by the republican movement, he will not try to set a date for the start of decommissioning. (My impression is that these remarks were made to me on the basis of precise understandings with the British Government and that there may have been a meeting earlier today either between Trimble and the Prime Minister or Trimble's advisers and John Holmes.)

My interlocutors went on to say that an important contribution by the Irish Government to the yes vote will be to avoid publicly contesting what the Prime Minister states tomorrow. We should appreciate that the Prime Minister will be speaking in the particular context of the struggle for Unionist votes.

For what it is worth, Trimble's people are aware of rumours that two or three named members of the IRA Army Council have reservations about Adams' strategy (and may have been involved in meetings on this subject), and that opinion among IRA activists is more evenly balanced than the leadership's show of strength on Sunday last would suggest.

Yours sincerely



Philip McDonagh
Counsellor