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From: sbwhoep [redacted]
Sent: Saturday, January 9, 2010 9:42 AM
To: H
Subject: H: Succinct summary on NI situation at this moment. Details to follow later. Sid

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 January 9, 2010

The First Lady, her young lover, and a scandal that could hand power to Sinn Fein

David McKittrick reports on the far-reaching consequences of Iris Robinson's infidelity

The mesmerising saga of the toyboy, the Northern Ireland First Minister and his straying wife threatened to engulf Belfast's frail political settlement last night.

Following a day closeted with advisers Peter Robinson, head of the Northern Ireland government, broke his silence to insist defiantly that he would not step down after a day of turmoil. His move is unlikely to stem the clamour for an inquiry into an affair which has fused the political and the sexual. First indications are that members of his party, the Democratic Unionists (DUP), are reacting to the disclosures with strong disapproval. The party is highly religious and lays heavy emphasis on Christian family values. It is also currently highly nervous that the revelations could cost it seats in the coming Westminster election. If the DUP were to fracture as a result of the scandal it could lead the way to Sinn Fein becoming the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly - allowing it to nominate its own first minister and putting the peace process in jeopardy.

Disclosures in a BBC television programme on the activities of his wife, Iris, who has exited from public life, led to a day-long flurry of political calls for inquiries into the Robinson family.

Mr Robinson stands accused of failing to notify the authorities that his wife had been involved in financial transactions without declaring an interest. She helped a 19-year-old "toyboy" lover to set up a business.

Mr Robinson said he had asked for the appointment of a senior counsel "to ask me any questions he or she wishes to ask, and to give an opinion as to what I should have disclosed or whether I have breached an obligation".

Insisting he had done nothing wrong, Mr Robinson accused the BBC of broadcasting "smears and innuendo". Saying that he did not rule out a defamation action, he declared: "I am being tried in the court of public opinion."

Sinn Fein's Martin McGuinness, who is Deputy First Minister, said he was shocked at the BBC revelations and is seeking talks with both Mr Robinson and Gordon Brown. Mr McGuinness was publicly sympathetic when news of the scandal broke, but his veering towards a tougher line is taken as indicating a calculation that Mr Robinson may not survive the storm.

Mr Robinson, who has been First Minister for 18 months, is regarded as a pivotal figure in the peace process since he was prepared to follow the Rev Ian Paisley into government with Sinn Fein.

But the state of the political settlement has appeared increasingly rocky as Mr Robinson has resisted pressure from almost all points of the political compass to complete devolution by accepting a transfer of responsibility for policing from London to Belfast.

His reluctance to move on the policing issue was attributed to nervousness about challenges from hardline opponents in the Westminster general election. Now opponents are speculating that it might instead have at least partly been due to the family scandal which has just become public but which he knew of for months.

In recent days Mrs Robinson dramatically announced that she was leaving politics. She is currently Westminster MP for east Belfast, a councillor and a member of the Belfast Assembly. Yesterday there were calls for her to depart immediately and stop drawing her salaries.

These reflected the fact that, while her husband might have a faint chance of political survival, her behaviour is regarded as inexcusable.

She had been a friend of Kirk McCambley's father, Billy. Before he died, he asked Mrs Robinson to look after his son. The BBC programme, Spotlight, revealed that her relationship with Kirk had developed into a sexual one. It said she suggested to him that he go into a business venture which was partly organised by Castlereagh council, where she is an alderman.

She is said to have obtained £50,000 from two property developers, to be used to set up the business. She is also said to have helped approve the McCambley proposal without declaring a financial interest. The council said yesterday it was investigating.

The young man was interviewed for the programme. So too was Mrs Robinson's one-time political adviser Selwyn Black, a former Methodist minister, who gave the BBC access to 150 text messages allegedly sent to him by Mrs Robinson. Among those calling for a public inquiry yesterday were Jim Allister of Traditional Unionist Voice, a hardline critic of Mr Robinson. He said the issues in the programme must be addressed "with utter transparency and candour". Ulster Unionist leader Sir Reg Empey called for Mrs Robinson's immediate resignation, saying: "It is clear that Iris Robinson's continuing position as an MP, Assembly member and councillor is utterly untenable. She should resign all her positions with immediate effect."

He added: "It is also unfortunately the case that the office of the First Minister is embroiled in these matters. My party will study the events outlined by the BBC and the very serious allegations that have been made with regards to the conduct of the First Minister. Inevitably the appropriate authorities will be required to investigate the allegations made against the First Minister."

* Northern Ireland Secretary Shaun Woodward refused to speculate about Mr Robinson's future.

But he said: "It is a responsibility on everyone in the Assembly to understand that the consequences of allowing the political process to slide would undoubtedly have an impact on the broader canvas.

"And that if anybody were to be selfish enough to think this is a moment when that can be allowed to be put in the deep freeze, even some may wish to unpick, they would be extremely irresponsible, foolish and would be playing very, very dangerous games."

Speaking to BBC Radio 4's Today programme, Mr Woodward said that the First Minister had to be allowed the opportunity to clear his name.

But he went on: "I'm very conscious of the fact that while all that is happening, he is First Minister and the business of devolution, the business of the Executive must go on.

"I hope he will be able to resume the responsibilities as First Minister to ensure that the work of the Executive continues and that includes the talks on policing and justice devolution." PA