



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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28 July, 1997.

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Taoiseach

This is a worrying campaign. The undermining of Mo Mowlam does not serve our interests. Re X, page 3 we should, judiciously and with care, take appropriate opportunities. The conference of the British-Irish Association on 14-15 Sept. will be one such opportunity.

Dear Seán

Criticism of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

You will have seen the negative profile of Mo Mowlam in yesterday's Sunday Telegraph. This is the latest in a series of profiles, articles and comments on the new Secretary of State designed to present her in an unflattering light. Together with the leak of the NIO parades document they add up, in my view, to a campaign to undermine her self-confidence as well as her standing and authority in Government and in Northern Ireland.

As to who is behind all this it is difficult to be certain. But the evidence suggests that forces within the NIO who are unsympathetic to her style and outlook are combining with pro-Unionist sections of the London media to create the image of a Secretary of State who is not on top of the job, who lacks authority, and whose health is in question. These certainly are amongst the themes that we have been hearing from some quarters over the past few months. Not long after her appointment Paul Bew, of Queen's University, spoke to me about Mowlam's lack of knowledge of the lexicon of Anglo-Irish relations, her garrulousness and her propensity to put her foot in it. The remarks were made in the presence of others en marge of a Conference here in London and I felt obliged to defend the Secretary of State. Similar remarks

have been made to me by David Burnside, Director of the Unionist Information Office in London, and Bruce Anderson who writes a weekly column for the Spectator and moves in Unionist and Conservative circles. I should say that, although he has had a number of opportunities to do so, David Trimble has not criticised Mowlam to me; he reserves his fire for current and past members of the *Irish* Government. But I would guess that the pattern of attack is orchestrated from the quarters mentioned above and by some of these individuals.

The whispering campaign is focussed, sustained and sinister. I can think of no other member of the Labour Government that has had to endure a similar attack on their competence and authority since the election of the Government. Mandelson is criticised, and the subject of more gossip than most, but articles and profiles are written from a position of grudging and fearful respect. Prescott has come under some fire but he too has won general approval for the way he has tackled his large and unwieldy brief. Both have benefited from the continuing glow of the Labour Government's honeymoon and the fierce defence of Ministers and of Labour's record that the Labour machine is capable of mounting. There have been some positive articles about Mowlam in the Independent and Financial Times which suggests that some kind of counteroffensive is underway. I expected that the attacks would be blunted somewhat by the outcome on the Orange Parades on the 12th and the IRA ceasefire. But yesterday's profile, coming *after* the IRA ceasefire, suggests that the forces ranged against Mowlam are intent on continuing their campaign.

All this suggests that those involved feel that they may have some scope and perhaps even licence to take her on. The question that must be asked is whether she is receiving the full backing of the Government machine, her Ministerial colleagues, and her Department. Someone who was involved in the process over the past months asked me ruefully how is it that when things go right it is the Prime Minister that gets the profile; and when things go wrong or are dodgy it is the Secretary of State? The same source remarked at how little latitude Mowlam found she had on the parades issue when it came to taking the final decisions. Moreover it does not appear that Mowlam has developed an effective working relationship with her own official Press Officers within the NIO and cannot rely on them to protect her when the going gets tough. Overall I do not have the impression of a happy ship, and there would appear to be growing strains between Mowlam and Downing Street and perhaps between Mowlam and some of her officials in the NIO. We know that Mowlam is worried at the implications of leaks from within the NIO, but further evidence

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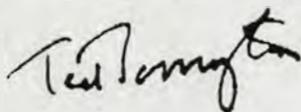
of her concern is in Patrick Wintour's (the Observer) remark to Colin Wrafter that she has confided to him her concerns in this regard.

In this connection I was also struck by the remarks to Philip McDonagh by Helen Jackson, Mowlam's Parliamentary Private Secretary, that we should do as much as we can to offer the Secretary of State private friendship and public support. It was a strange appeal that really only makes sense if Mowlam is under the kinds of internal pressure that we suspect.

These could of course be teething problems arising out of the difficulties of adjusting to the Governmental machine at a time of great stress and strain within Northern Ireland. Mowlam knew before she took the job, and often remarked, that the first six months would be a testing and gruelling time. She is resilient and tough, and capable of shrugging off attacks on her from the media. But if these represent a deeper movement within Party or Government circles she may face an even more difficult time ahead than she expected.

What are the consequences for us? Mowlam comes to the Northern Ireland portfolio better prepared than most of her predecessors and with a more thorough appreciation of the Irish Government's position. I believe she is sympathetic to a settlement that would suit our interests in terms of the protection of the rights of the Nationalist community and North-South cooperation. These indeed may well be the very reasons why she has come under attack. Her opponents may calculate that, even if they do not succeed in having her removed or reshuffled, their criticisms will have the effect of undermining her authority and judgement in the areas I have mentioned and of making her less amenable to arguments from the Nationalist side when the substantive negotiations get underway. Her opponents may also want to reinforce the need for the Prime Minister to keep a tight rein on his Secretary of State as the negotiating stakes get higher.

Yours sincerely,



Ted Barrington  
Ambassador