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Reference Code: 2021/100/20

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RECEIVED 11 NOV 1998

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Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Second Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin

9 November 1998

*Private Secretary,
The arrival will need to note - especially the
report from Ambassador Conroy.*

Dear Secretary,

S. Hare

Conversations with Mowlam and Others on the Peace Process

Over the past few days I have had an opportunity to discuss the current situation in implementing the Good Friday Agreement with a number of figures on the British side, including Mo Mowlam, Bill Jeffrey from the NIO, Michael Pakenham from the Cabinet Office, and George Fergusson from the FCO. I have already reported orally to you on Jeffrey's views.

The common theme in all the conversations was agreement that the strategy we are pursuing is the only way to keep up the momentum, i.e. intensive work on North/South and Departmental structures in the hope of creating a climate where progress can be made later on the Executive. I have to say, however, that none of those I spoke to were sanguine that this would work and that we would see an early formation of the Shadow Executive or the Executive itself. All were acutely aware of the limitations on the margins for manoeuvre open to Trimble and Sinn Fein to make the necessary moves. None seemed to have any new ideas on how to remove or get around the impasse. Mowlam, when I spoke to her on Thursday night, was not optimistic and said that "things are not so good". She hoped that something could come out of the contacts between the Prime Minister and Adams in coming days, but did not have, or choose not to reveal, any new ideas. She wondered for how long activity on North/South could hold matters together. In the meantime she said that she intended to

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press ahead with further measures on the security front and with publication of the normalisation paper. I pointed to our view that the paper was too vague and imprecise as it stood, but she repeated her wish to get it out as soon as possible.

Earlier in the week Jeffrey was more hopeful that progress on North/South would fill a potential and dangerous vacuum and create space for possible progress on the Executive front. He himself raised our concerns at the attitude of the Northern Ireland Departments to our proposals on implementation bodies and, somewhat ruefully I thought, said that there was no intention on the part of the Civil Servants or Paul Murphy to take a destructively negative attitude to our ideas when the Taoiseach was in Belfast. I said that, whatever about intent, this was the way their interventions came across. He suggested that, if we thought it helpful, you and he could meet to try to isolate the technical issues for resolution at official level from the larger political questions which required action on the political front.

On the Executive/Decommissioning issue Jeffrey several times referred to your suggestion that what is needed is an indication of the Republican Movement's intent. The problem was how to obtain this. Blair had hoped that something along these lines might have been forthcoming in his meeting with Martin McGuinness but, in the event, McGuinness had given nothing. Blair had seen this as a setback, in particular in the light of earlier indications that McGuinness might have something interesting to say. Jeffrey was inclined to agree with your view that McGuinness may have been "spoken to" between his meeting with the Taoiseach and his conversation with the Prime Minister.

He said, however, that if the Prime Minister got any indication from Sinn Fein of a willingness to move on decommissioning he would be prepared to work on Trimble.

Jeffrey wondered whether McGuinness's recent article in the Irish Times was designed to rally Sinn Fein by pointing out the success of the Party in the process, or whether it was intended to signal possible dangers ahead. Several people had mentioned their sense that the mood was similar to the period before Canary Wharf. He said that Mowlam was worried about this, as she usually is when the Movement "goes out of radio contact". This view was repeated to me by Fergusson who said that the internal assessment on the British side was "somewhat gloomy". Some of the information coming to them (I took him to refer to the intelligence services) suggested difficulties within the Movement, but these were, as he put it, "at the edge of the screen" and not

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central. I had no sense from Fergusson that the British side feel that the ceasefire is in imminent danger. I put it to both Jeffrey and Fergusson, and they agreed, that the context now was totally different to 1996 - the Agreement, Sinn Fein's direct involvement in political action, the close relations between the two Governments, the actions taken on the Republican agenda such as prisoner releases. I made the point nonetheless that to a considerable extent the problem had been created by David Trimble over the period since the Agreement. While we could understand the pressures on him there was, in my view, some validity in McGuinness's argument about the need for leadership on the Unionist side. Fergusson took the line, more for the sake of argument, I felt, than anything else, that there was a qualitative difference between trying to persuade a volatile and large electorate of several hundred thousand, which was Trimble's problem, and the issue facing the Republican leadership which only had to address a small, highly focussed group of perhaps one thousand.

Pakenham's main concern was with what the Prime Minister would say in his address to the Dail later in the month if the impasse continues or if things deteriorate. Work on Blair's speech is underway. Pakenham said that one of the main themes will be the changed climate of British-Irish relations. The problem was what tone to adopt. In recent conversations between Number 10 and the Cabinet Office there is agreement that if the current impasse continues the rhetoric of Blair's address would have to be more muted than they originally intended or would have wished. As Pakenham put it, we can hardly pretend that "all is sweetness and light" when we know that there are dangers ahead. He emphasised nonetheless that the speech would be highly positive on current relations between the two Governments and countries; the issue was more one of tone and language than content.

Comment

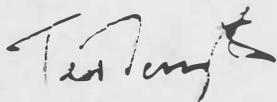
You will see from the above that the British continue to have fears for the early implementation of the Agreement and, it would appear, few new ideas for overcoming the impasse. They put considerable stress on the momentum that could be created by progress on North/South and the implementation bodies, but I sense that, even as they say it, they have doubts whether it will work. They are, as we all are, caught between the rock of Trimble's insistence on some decommissioning and the hard place of Sinn Fein's unwillingness or inability to deliver. They are unclear and uncertain about Republican intentions and must have worries that this will begin to feed into public and political opinion here. This, together with Mowlam's fear of the Movement

losing radio contact, must be amongst the reasons why Blair will maintain his dialogue with Adams. But the important point I think is Jeffrey's: that Blair would be prepared to put pressure on Trimble if he received an indication of intent from Sinn Fein.

To date public opinion has been remarkably supportive of the Government but we know that opinion polls and focus groups are beginning to question the Government's strategy on prisoners and arms. The Conservatives are well aware of this, as Philip McDonagh's recent reports show. Their spokesman, Andrew Mackay, with whom I had dinner recently, takes a highly political view. They will maintain bipartisanship but will continue to harass the Government on the prisoners and decommissioning question - not (in my view) primarily for policy reasons but in the hope that if things go wrong they can reap electoral advantage next year (there will be Local, Scottish, Welsh and European elections) if some of the shine is taken off one of Blair's major achievements.

Blair's Commons majority means that he has little to fear from this source at Westminster. But a number of developments in recent weeks - fears of recession and slowdown in the economy, the handling of the Ron Davies affair, revelations about the personal lives of Ministers - have exposed a flank and may mean that the Government will be more sensitive to political and media criticism of its Northern Ireland policy than heretofore.

Yours sincerely,



Ted Barrington
Ambassador