

File

FROM: I M BURNS, DUS(L)
1 March 1990

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cc: PS/PUS (L&B) [3&4] - B
Mr Ledlie [5] - B
Mr Deverell [6] - B
Mr Daniell [7] - B
Mr J E McConnell [8] - B
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PS/SECRETARY OF STATE (L&B) [1&2] - B

DISCUSSION WITH FR REID

Paragraph 2(iv) of Mr McConnell's minute of 27 February adds further point to the need to talk again to Mr King about any papers that may be missing from the ones we hold. If the Secretary of State wishes to discuss this more fully before deciding on the next action to take, then I am at his disposal: but I think the straightforward point is that there are some gaps in the paper work we have, and only Mr King is likely to be in a position to help us fill any of those gaps.

2. There is however a more immediate point for decision in Mr McConnell's minute - Fr Reid's asking Mr McConnell how he would respond to an invitation from Cardinal O Fiaich to meet him in Armagh if Gerry Adams were also present. The question will no doubt be asked again if it is not asked again, that is the end of the matter, and Mr McConnell needs to know what answer to give.

3. The meeting is probably Reid's own idea, and is probably based on nothing more than a general belief that making a contact between the Provisionals and the Government would be a good thing in its own right. There is no reason to think that there is anything for the Government in agreeing to Reid's proposal, and there are several strong reasons why we should not agree to it. No official could go to a planned meeting with the President of Sinn Fein, particularly a meeting being arranged with such conspiratorial secrecy, without giving the impression that Ministers were interested in establishing contact with Sinn Fein/PIRA. The very fact that before giving his reply Mr McConnell will have had time to consult Ministers will add to the impression that any acceptance of Reid's idea means that Ministers are willing to have an indirect (but not very indirect) dialogue with the Provisionals. Moreover if, as is probable, this is an idea of Reid's, on which he has not yet

consulted Adams, then any acceptance by Mr McConnell would look to the Provisionals as though we were making (and therefore perhaps anxious to make) the first move to establish talks.

4. The answer to Reid must therefore be in the negative, but I think there will be some advantage in trying to avoid giving him too curt a reply. Although the odds are stacked against him, we do not want to discourage Reid from continuing to try to persuade the Provisionals to look for a political, rather than a paramilitary, way forward. I suggest that Mr McConnell's reply should therefore be one that echoes the Secretary of State's public remarks, and that if he is again asked whether he would be willing to meet a third party with Adams present he should reply:

- I am not sure what you are suggesting. Adams knows the Secretary of State's views - as long as Sinn Fein support and endorse terrorism they cannot be treated in the same way as any other political party. What the Government is looking for is a genuine end to violence. Unless Adams's thinking has gone a lot further than anything you have told me, any meeting would be taking place under false pretences, and I could not do that. My answer is no.

(Fr Reid has a considerable capacity to talk up what he has been told by others, and Mr McConnell's reply needs to end with an unequivocal "no" if Reid is to be prevented from interpreting it as "maybe".)

- Reid may claim that Adams's thinking has advanced a long way, and that he (Reid) is sure the meeting would be worthwhile. Mr McConnell should ask for hard evidence; and should repeat the Secretary of State's views. He should continue to say No. He should give Reid no room to think that any other answer is possible so long as Sinn Fein support the use of violence.

5. Would the Secretary of State be content with a response on these lines please?

SIGNED:

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1 March 1990
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SECRET AND PERSONAL