SECRET AND PERSONAL

FROM: PS/SECRETARY OF STATE
23 NOVEMBER 1989

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cc. PS/Secretary of State (L&B) [1&2] - M
[3&4] - M
PS/PUS (L&B) [5]
Mr Burns [6] - M
Mr Deverell [7] - M
Mr Daniell [8] - M
Mr J McConnell

NOTE FOR THE RECORD

DISCUSSION WITH FATHER REID

On the evening of 20 November the Secretary of State discussed with officials (PUS, Mr Burns, Mr Deverell, Mr Daniell and Mr McConnell) Mr McConnell's minute of 16 November recording a fresh approach to him by Father Reid.

2. Mr McConnell said that since that minute he had received a further call from Father Reid (on 19 November) suggesting a meeting and saying that there was "business to be done". He had known Father Reid for many years and believed that the priest trusted him. Father Reid had begun to speak seriously about the possibility of bringing an end to PIRA violence in July: he had made clear that he envisaged not a ceasefire but a permanent cessation of violence. Mr McConnell judged that Father Reid was to some extent operating independently but that nonetheless he probably did have access to and the trust of very senior figures in the Republican movement. Father Reid had said that when in the past he had tried to help bring the violence to an end he had not persisted in the effort; he now regretted this and was determined to "carry it through this time". Previous meetings which Mr McConnell had had with Father Reid had been arranged to discuss prisons issues and this could certainly be done again. However, he had stalled this latest approach from Father Reid in order to seek instructions.

3. In a general discussion the following points were made:

(i) Following the factitious controversy over the Secretary of State's "100 days" interviews, there would be a special sensitivity in any suggestion of talks with Sinn Fein.

(ii) At the same time, Father Reid was not a member of Sinn Fein and his approach need not be spurned. It would be acceptable for Mr McConnell to have a further meeting with him to discuss prisons matters. If any other matters were raised, Mr McConnell should stick to a sceptical listening mode, confining himself in reply to some basic points about the Government's position.

(iii) These were:

- The principle that the status of Northern Ireland could only be changed with the consent of the majority was sacrosanct and it was inconceivable that the Government (or any successor) could deviate from that principle.

- In his "100 days" interviews the Secretary of State had been making the point that if violence had demonstrably ceased and Sinn Fein had ceased to support it, then there would be a new situation to which any Government would be bound to respond. (The phrase "flexible response" should not be used to Father Reid.) However, that was purely a hypothetical situation: all the evidence was that the Provisionals' commitment to violence continued unabated.

- The campaign of violence was entirely futile and counter-productive, since it made even more remote any prospect Republicans might have of persuading the majority in Northern Ireland to agree to a change in its status.

(iv) During any meeting Mr McConnell should not make any enquiry about Father Reid's position. If at any point the priest disclosed that he was an intermediary, then the meeting should be terminated. If at any point a document was offered, this should be accepted unless Father Reid made clear that it came from Sinn Fein. If this was unclear, Mr McConnell should take the document: if it subsequently turned out to be from Sinn Fein, that would obviously affect future contacts with Father Reid.

(v) Mr McConnell should not seek to glean any insights into the current state of the Provisionals nor take any active steps to keep open the contact with Father Reid (he would probably do that himself anyway). The keynote should be to help ensure that Father Reid had a clear understanding of the Government's position and was brought to realise the futility of PIRA violence.

4. The Secretary of State endorsed all these points and asked to be kept closely in touch with developments. He went on to ask for views on the proposal put to him by Mr Hume on 19 September that he should make a "no strategic interest" speech at a time to be agreed with the SDLP leader. It was agreed in discussion that, although some reference on these lines might find a home in the "nudge" speech as one part of the political mosaic, a major speech on this theme at the moment, in the wake on the "100 days" interviews, would be unwise. The Secretary of State said that he agreed with this. Given that HMG in any case stood by the principle of popular consent as determining the future of the North, the existence or not of a strategic interest was to a large extent irrelevant.

SJL

S J LEACH
PRIVATE SECRETARY
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