

From: Veronica Sutherland
Date: 15 July 1996

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To: Mr Thomas (L&B)

cc: PS/SofS (L&B)
PS/Michael Ancram (L&B)
PS/Sir J Wheeler (L&B)
PS/PUS (L&B)
PS/Sir D Fell
Mr Legge
Mr Bell
Mr Leach
Mr Steele
Mr Ray, Liaison
Mr Maccabe
Mr Perry
Mr Stephens
Mr Lamont, RID
Mr Budd, Cabinet Office - by fax.
Mr Holmes, No. 10 - by fax.

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John 16/7.

LUNCH WITH MINISTER OF JUSTICE.

1. My lunch with Mrs Owen went ahead. It was extremely friendly throughout. We agreed on the importance of the two Governments being seen to be working together amicably.
2. We first discussed recent events. I took Mrs Owen through the arguments supporting the fact that the Chief Constable's decisions in relation to Garvaghy Road had been driven by operational rather than political considerations and that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State had not sought to influence them. I think I had some success in this. She also admitted that in similar circumstances in the Republic, the relationship between her own position and that of the Garda Commissioner would be roughly similar. The Commissioner would have told her what he proposed, but she would not have intervened. Her interest would be to ensure he had sufficient resources.
3. Turning to recent statements Mrs Owen emphasized that the Taoiseach felt he had no option but to make a statement along the lines he did last Friday, in order to contain a possible outbreak of nationalist fury and resultant violence. Mrs Owen said she believed that he had indeed prevented even worse excesses of violence than had taken place over the weekend. Everyone she had spoken to recently believed he had been right to make the statement. I responded that whatever the context, the Taoiseach's words had been stronger than one would expect one Head of Government to use of another.
4. More positively, we agreed the importance of intergovernmental dialogue. Mrs Owen emphasized several times the need to hold an early Intergovernmental Conference, both to demonstrate that the two Governments were working together and to provide an opportunity for

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dialogue. Amongst other matters, discussion on how to pre-empt disturbances over the Apprentice Boys' March on 14 August would be important. (I am therefore extremely glad to hear than an IGC will take place on Thursday, and informed Paddy Teahon and the Tanaiste's office, as requested by Jonathan Stephens.)

5. We then discussed the relationship between the British Government and the Unionists. I underlined the even-handed nature of our approach. People in the Republic might perceive things differently and believe that in the final analysis the British Government would side with the Unionists. But I asked her to reflect that the Chief Constable's decision had been taken in a desire to save lives on both sides. Moreover, anyone who studied the history of the last two years must accept that the British Government had seriously engaged in trying to push the peace process forward in an even-handed manner. The difficulty was to try and persuade the Unionists of the need for compromise. Mrs Owen did not dispute my case, and argued - in familiar terms - that the British Government should exert greater pressure on the Unionists. If this caused them to walk out of the all-party talks, they would surely return eventually.

6. On the content of the all-party talks in Belfast, Mrs Owen emphasized strongly that it would be disastrous if the British Government were to allow the Unionists to force decommissioning to be tackled in advance of other issues by moving it to the top of the agenda. This would be a false victory for the Unionists, for it would once more enable the nationalists to accuse the British Government of bad faith. In conclusion, she said that the Unionists might claim victory marching down Garvaghy Road but in fact they had handed the moral high-ground to Sinn Fein and lost the support they had gained in recent months both in Britain and more particularly North America.

Comment

7. In current difficult circumstances this was a positive discussion, covering topics mentioned both in my conversation with Paddy Teahon and the PUS's with Ted Barrington. Mrs Owen clearly wants to maintain constructive discussion with us, and assured me that all her Cabinet colleagues felt the same way. She plans to be in Belfast for the talks tomorrow.

(Signed)

Veronica Sutherland
AMBASSADOR

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