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From: Veronica Sutherland
Date: 18 November 1996

To: Mr Stephens

cc: PS/Sofs (L&B)
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PS/Sir J Wheeler (L&B)
PS/PUS (L&B)
PS/Sir D Fell
Mr Thomas
Mr Bell
Mr Watkins
Mr Wood
Mr Beeton
Mr Hill
Mr Leach
Mr Perry
Mr Legge
Mr Steele
Mr Maccabe
Mr Lamont, RID
Mr Holmes, No. 10
Mr Budd, Cabinet Office
Mr Westmacott, Washington

F4
JH-189.

THE TAOISEACH'S WASHINGTON SPEECH

1. Initial reactions here to the Taoiseach's address to Congress have focussed largely on his expressions of optimism about the prospects for an IRA ceasefire. Comment in the press has been largely sceptical.

2. Sunday's Business Post apart, little attention has been paid to the passage included as a response to approaches to the Taoiseach by loyalists (Holmes' letter to Lindsay, NIO, of 9 September): "The Irish Government has no interest in propelling anybody into an agreement that they do not wish to be part of. We are not motivated by any interest of our own other than that of obtaining an agreement which is reasonable and fair to the aspirations of both communities in Northern Ireland." The Post said that this had been picked up by both Sinn Fein and "sources within Fianna Fail", who claimed that the passage ignored the constitutional aspirations to unity.

3. We have now talked to the DFA (O'Flóinn) and the Taoiseach's Department (Donlon) about the address. Both said that the reaction to the ceasefire statements in Washington had taken the Irish Government aback. The main problem had been the press reporting before the Taoiseach's speech, which had conflated his comments on the talks and ceasefire, giving a more bullish assessment on the latter than had been intended. Since then Government spokesmen had tried to put over a more cautious line, but it was difficult to turn back the tide without seeming to have gone into reverse.

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4. In contrast, the reaction to the 'no interest' passage has been unexpectedly mild. There have been a few enquiries from the other political parties but no criticism, despite the Sunday Business Post's attempt to whip up some adverse comment. The only formal reaction has come from the (progressive Unionist-leaning) New Dialogue group in the British Labour Party, with Harry Barnes MP having issued a statement in London at the end of last week welcoming the language as a step in the right direction.

5. Enlarging on this theme Donlon told me he thought the Taoiseach would like to move further on the constitutional issue, but was restrained by the need to take Fianna Fail with him on any major new initiative. At present they were not ready for this. Thus the text as delivered was consistent with the Frameworks and related documents. It did not represent a significant shift.

6. To prove his point, Donlon showed me in confidence (please protect) an earlier draft of the speech containing the word 'selfish'. The second sentence of the passage quoted above began: "The Irish Government is not motivated by any selfish interest". It had however been necessary to clear this text with the other Coalition leaders. The draft had reached Dick Spring in Belfast on the very day that David Trimble stood him up. Whether Spring was motivated by pique, or by a conviction that the time was not quite right to use the word "selfish" is not clear, but he asked that it should be deleted.

7. Donlon added that, given the low key response to the speech, the Taoiseach would look for an opportunity to use the same formulation again, and would also reconsider the possibility of including the word "selfish".

8. As regards the talks in the North, Donlon said he did not think the Ulster Unionists were particularly keen to engage seriously with the Irish Government, of whom they had the deepest mistrust and particularly of Spring. On the other hand the Taoiseach and his colleagues were reasonably reassured by progress in the discussions between the UUP and the SDLP and believed that the former were concerned to make real progress.

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Comment

10. I read all this as an indication that, while there is certainly no rift between Spring and Bruton, the latter would like to move forward on constitutional issues if only circumstances (ie the DFA and Fianna Fail) permitted. In the run-up to the Irish General Election, it seems unlikely that this calculation will change.

(Signed)
Veronica Sutherland
AMBASSADOR