

21/12/96 06:45
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FRI 20 DEC 96 21:43

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British Embassy
Washington

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20 December 1996
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John Holmes Esq
No 10

Dear John,

WJ
120²³/xin

MARTHA POPE

1. Many thanks for the copy of your letter of 16 December to Ken Lindsay.
2. I spoke to Martha Pope late on 18 December, shortly before she left Belfast for a two week break in the U.S. She said she was grateful for the efforts which had been made to reassure her, and to clear up remaining uncertainties. She remained unhappy about several aspects of the episode: a lot of people within the British Government clearly still believed that there was something in the allegations about her and Kelly. She assumed that there was some kind of intelligence report of a contact between Kelly and an American woman, and that an assessor had "stuck a Post-it on the top" suggesting that the woman might be her. The story had then been fed, one way or another, to Robert McCrea MP, and then into the hands of The Mail on Sunday.
3. She had recently seen the American Ambassador, on instructions from George Mitchell who wanted Crowe to pursue the story "to the fullest extent". She had already heard from Crowe of your conversation with him on 16 December. Crowe had told her that he had been very well received, and that you had explained that the Prime Minister had in the past come to the defence of people whom he had thought to be wrongly accused, only to find that he had not been in possession of all the facts. Understandably, he had not felt able to risk such exposure again.
4. At the end of our conversation, Pope asked me again why I thought HMG had not moved more quickly to deny the allegations against her. I made three comments:
 - a) As I'd told her before, the Northern Ireland Secretary had gone as far as he possibly could when talking to the Mail on Sunday before they ran their story. He could hardly have given an unqualified assertion that the facts were wrong since he didn't know what Pope or Kelly did in their private time;

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b) When a newspaper - even a tabloid - carried a front page splash like this, people not in the know tended to believe that there was something in it. Inevitably, it took a bit of time for word to get round that the story was a pack of lies;

c) Some people might have believed the story, particularly if Martha's suspicion about the existence of some kind of intelligence report proved correct. But her quick foot-work (and our denials) had ensured that everyone realised soon that there was nothing in the story.

5. Pope seemed to be more or less content with this. She'd be glad to get away for a while. It had been nice of President Clinton to give her his public backing on Tuesday. The bad news was that she just discovered that U.S. tax law had changed in the summer, and she would now have to hand the IRS 30% of her libel earnings.

*Yrwns over,
Perw.*

Peter Westmacott

cc: William Ehrman Esq, FCO
Ken Lindsay Esq, NIO

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