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SUBJECT
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Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

29 May 1997

Dear Gen,

VISIT OF PRESIDENT CLINTON, 29 MAY: NORTHERN IRELAND

This letter reports the conversation on Northern Ireland in a pre-lunch session. I am recording separately the lengthy discussion on Bosnia in the same session, while Philip Barton is recording the foreign policy conversation over lunch. The President was accompanied by Ambassador Crowe, Sandy Berger and Mary Ann Peters (NSC). Sir John Kerr, Jonathan Powell and I were present on our side.

Northern Ireland

President Clinton said that he had found the Government's early moves very encouraging. He wanted to be helpful. If he could say something useful, publicly or privately, on any issue, whether it was a ceasefire, decommissioning or whatever, he would be delighted to do so. The US had a certain position with the republican movement and some debts to call in. They were ready to do so at the right moment.

The Prime Minister said that our strategy was to reassure the Unionists about where we were going, and about the importance of the consent principle, while trying to bring in Sinn Fein through talking to them at official level and urging on them a new ceasefire. He wanted Sinn Fein in the talks sooner rather than later in order to force them to make the choice between the democratic path and their current position. All the parties in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic accepted the consent principle except Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein had to decide to negotiate without keeping open the option of violence. He would be as reasonable as he could in facilitating Sinn Fein's entry into talks, but he had to be careful. If the Unionists walked away, the process would be no further forward. If and when he made an offer to Sinn Fein, he would want to see great pressure

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put on them to accept it. He wanted to avoid a position where Sinn Fein kept adding new conditions. If the Unionists thought that we were in the process of making concessions, it would be very hard to keep them in.

The Prime Minister continued that the parades issue for the summer looked very difficult. Anything Sinn Fein could do to be reasonable in their approach would be helpful. Drumcree had done enormous damage last year. There was now a little more optimism but it was very fragile. President Clinton repeated that he was ready to help, and would reflect on what could be done about parades. As far as a political settlement was concerned, he wondered whether a solution existed which all parties could accept. The Prime Minister said that a united Ireland was unlikely for the foreseeable future. The need was to produce a devolved government in Northern Ireland, which had genuine respect for both traditions, together with some form of North/South cooperation. Most people accepted this basic approach, although there were significant differences about what the North/South arrangements should look like in practice. Paradoxically, the outlines of the solution could be seen, but it remained extremely difficult to get there.

President Clinton said that he had sensed from his own visit to Belfast that the people were ahead of their leaders in looking for a settlement. The Paisleys of this world, conditioned by a lifetime of conflict, were unlikely to be part of the solution. Admiral Crowe commented that there was something in this. However, at the time of Drumcree the supposed mass of reasonable people in the centre had been nowhere in sight. The Prime Minister said that one of his aims was to put pressure on the business community in Northern Ireland to intervene more in the political process. After all they had most to lose from violence and the absence of a settlement.

President Clinton agreed, and said he would go on trying to get US investment into Northern Ireland. But there was a need to find a political place for the party leaders to go, so that they did not simply define their identity by preventing the British Government from moving forward. People like Paisley had to find a role in a settlement somewhere. On the republican side, there were a lot of tough questions which Sinn Fein had not had to answer hitherto, because they had not been in negotiations. If they got into negotiations, they would have to decide what they would settle for. He guessed they would need some kind of guarantee of a connection to Ireland.

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I commented that it might be necessary, in arriving at a settlement, to leave the extremes of both sides behind. We might be able to achieve a settlement which did not have their active support, but with which they could live in practice. Meanwhile, one attraction of a settlement for the Unionists was the chance to become genuine politicians with a role in governing Northern Ireland, rather than simply speech makers. Berger commented that the Americans could play a role with the Unionists too. He had talked to Trimble recently. President Clinton added that he found Trimble impressive. The Prime Minister said that, at the end of the day, the key might lie in agreement between Trimble and Hume.

President Clinton concluded that we should keep the Americans in mind constantly in formulating our approach. They were ready to help wherever they could. He repeated that he was impressed by the start the new Government had made. He had also been watching Dr Mowlam on CNN the previous night, and had been most impressed by her solid, down to earth approach. He thought this would inspire confidence.

Comment

This was a largely analytical discussion, with a notable absence of policy pressure on us from the American side. President Clinton played straight down the line in response to several questions about Northern Ireland at the subsequent press conference.

I am copying this letter to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir John Kerr (Washington) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).

Yours ever
John

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Ken Lindsay Esq
Northern Ireland Office

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