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Rights & European Division

From Tony Beeton
12 June 1997File
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DESK IMMEDIATE

PS/SECRETARY OF STATE

cc PS/Mr Murphy
PS/PUS
PS/Sir David Fell
Mr Thomas
Mr Steele
Mr Ray
Mr Stephens
Mr Holmes, N° 10
Mr Budd, CabO

TELEPHONE CONTACT WITH SINN FEIN

Siobhan O'Hanlon called me at 10.30 this morning. She began by saying that it would not be possible for Sinn Fein to meet officials next Monday because of other diary commitments. I asked her whether she had any alternative dates to suggest. She said she had not - but she knew that we had preferred Monday and wanted to let me know quickly that they couldn't do it. She asked if I could come back with further suggestions later.

She then turned to other matters. Would it be possible, she asked, for Martin [McGuinness] to speak to Quentin Thomas on the telephone today. I said that I would check that out and get back to her but it would be useful if she could give me any idea about the purpose of the call. She said that Sinn Fein were concerned that Dr Mowlam was reported to have said there would be only one more meeting. Was that the case? I responded that I had seen the same reports and I reminded O'Hanlon that there had been no commitment to an open-ended process. We had both, I thought, felt that any meetings between us should be useful and I also reminded her that we had repeatedly emphasised the importance of events on the ground. I thought that she should understand clearly that recent actions had been viewed with great concern here.

She then said it was also being reported that the two Governments were trying to come to an agreement to move things forward. I responded that the two Governments, along with the other parties, were trying to reach an agreement which would allow progress to be made, but I could not make any specific comment beyond that on the reports she had referred to.

She returned to the question of meetings. If there was to be only one more meeting Sinn Fein would want to be sure that it would be conclusive. I told her I thought it was probably impossible to decide in advance that a meeting would be conclusive, but I understood the point she was making. For our part, I reminded her again, we would want to ensure that any meeting we had was useful. I then undertook to get back to her as soon as I had been able to discuss the possibility of a telephone call with Quentin Thomas.

Before I had left my room she telephoned again. Gerry Adams was due to open an Irish language centre in Belfast at 11.00, she told me and he was sure he would be asked about Dr

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Mowlam's comments. He had wondered whether I could say anything more to her before then. I told her I appreciated his concern and would call her back as soon as I was able.

I reported these exchanges to Quentin Thomas and then telephoned Siobhan O'Hanlon and spoke as instructed.

I said that Quentin Thomas would be able to speak to McGuinness later this morning (she was grateful and agreed to confirm the arrangements with me later). He would say more himself in that conversation, but I could say a little more myself. Clearly I would not go beyond what Dr Mowlam had said and it would be wrong to over-interpret her remarks anyway. It was surely common ground between us that the current meetings should not go on indefinitely and that they were not parallel negotiations. She agreed with that point. I reminded her that the purpose which we had set out from the time of the Prime Minister's speech was to enable us to clarify our respective positions to one another. Dr Mowlam felt that one further meeting would be sufficient for that purpose. It would probably be helpful for her to know that we intended to write to Sinn Fein before the next meeting and that we were confident that in the light of that one more meeting would indeed be enough for us to be clear about where we both stood. I repeated that Quentin Thomas would probably say a little more about that to McGuinness when they spoke later.

Comment

I thought that during the first two calls I detected a jittery and worried tone in O'Hanlon. I believe that Sinn Fein are feeling the pressure at the moment and that her second call, responding to Gerry Adams' direct concerns about being put on the spot publicly this morning, was evidence of that and of a wish not to narrow their room for manoeuvre. When I made my points to her about events on the ground and specifically about the concerns which recent actions had raised she did not, as she has on many previous occasions, bother with the ritual denial of any connection to them. Finally, when I returned to her she seemed relieved that a telephone conversation would take place and even a little excited at the mention of a letter. I suspect that speculation on the Sinn Fein side will now be running high (they may well make a connection with their earlier question about the two Governments even though no more had been said about that than my initial no comment).

signed
Tony Beeton