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cc: JP
PB
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FCS/97/143

NORTHERN IRELAND SECRETARY

File
16/12.CLOSED UNDER THE
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION
ACT 2000Statement on Bloody Sunday

1. Thank you for copying me your letter of 1 December to the Prime Minister about your proposed statement on "Bloody Sunday".
2. I have some reservations about an apology, not least for the precedents it may set for other episodes in our history (eg Amritsar). I also understand (although this is not spelled out in your letter) that our apology may give rise to additional compensation claims, and possibly action against us under the European Convention on Human Rights.
3. On the other hand, I know the depth of feeling in Ireland on the issue of Bloody Sunday. It is certainly right - and time - for us to try to draw a line under it in the most positive and productive way we can. I fear that anything short of a review or even a full reopening of the enquiry is unlikely to receive a favourable reaction, from either the Irish government or nationalist opinion. But I can also see that if we were to reopen the debate in this way, it would be likely to aggravate rather than heal the wound in the immediate future.
4. If the balance of the government's interests seems to lie with the apology route, I am content to proceed as you suggest. I also fully endorse your belief that a statement should happen sooner rather than later, and certainly should not await the outcome of the approach. Our position will become increasingly difficult to preserve, and Irish impatience increasingly justified, were we to prolong a decision on the way forward until the New Year - dangerously close to the anniversary of Bloody Sunday when emotions will undoubtedly be running high, and difficult for us to resist charges of foot-dragging,

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whatever your statement says, to the likely detriment of the talks.

5. I know your officials have very much in their minds the need to take the Irish painstakingly through the reasons behind the Government's response on "Bloody Sunday" in advance of an announcement. We cannot be too careful in how we present our response, and if at least we can convince them (and, indeed, the wider international community) that we have thought long and hard about the material they gave us, even if in the end we have not acted exactly as they would have wished, we may be able to stem some of the harshest criticism. The Embassy in Dublin will of course do its utmost to put across this message to its contacts in consultation with your Department.

6. I am copying this minute to the Prime Minister, Derry Irvine, John Morris, Charles Falconer, Jack Straw, George Robertson and Sir Robin Butler.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Robin Cook'.

ROBIN COOK

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

8 December 1997

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minute dated 8/12/97