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PR 247

[From Mr Thomas cc: PS/PS(L) - 19.7.96]

FROM: A J N Tansley
British Embassy, Dublin

DATE: 19 July 1996

CC: Mr Thomas - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Hill - B
Mr Maccabe - B
Mr Legge - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Wood (L&B) - B
Mr Stephens - B
Mr Lamont, RID - B

DHM
HMA

ANDREW HUNTER MP

1. I saw Andrew Hunter MP at the end of his visit to Dublin on 18 July. He had earlier called on the Tanaiste, Proinsias de Rossa, Sean Donlon and Des O'Malley and had had lunch with Albert Reynolds.

2. All Mr Hunter's interlocutors had impressed on him the depth of feeling that that the RUC's handling of events in Drumcree last week had aroused, and by what was perceived as the inadequate British Government response. None of those to whom he had spoke accepted that responsibility for what had happened could be laid solely at the door of the RUC.

3. Attempting to explain the reasons for the Taoiseach's comments on Friday night, Donlon said that the Taoiseach had been annoyed that he had been kept waiting for more than two and a half hours before being able to speak to the Prime Minister by 'phone on the evening of 11 July. He had then been angered by what he had perceived as the Prime Minister's failure to appreciate the seriousness of the situation. That his subsequent letter to the Prime Minister had received no reply had further antagonised him.

4. All Hunter's interlocutors had impressed upon him their concern about the effect the last week had had on the SDLP's support. While he had been at the DFA, he had been told that informal soundings made in Northern Ireland in the last week had revealed that, if an election were held tomorrow, Sinn Fein would probably secure a majority of the Nationalist vote.

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Although this was likely to decrease somewhat as memories of the events in Drumcree faded, the SDLP's position had been badly damaged.

5. Looking to the future, the Tanaiste had made clear his view that, if the all-party talks had not begun substantive business before they broke up for the summer, it was highly unlikely that the SDLP would return when they resumed in September. The Tanaiste had also repeated what Adams had told Irish officials on 17 July, that while an IRA ceasefire was not out of the question, it was difficult to envisage one in the foreseeable future. Donlon had also commented to Mr Hunter that Adams's position within the Republican movement had been badly damaged and his arguments currently carried little weight. In contrast, Donlon thought that McGuinness (and McLaughlin) appeared to have maintained their influence and were more representative of mainstream thinking.

6. Mr Hunter also said that de Rossa and Reynolds had remarked to him on the youth of those involved in the demonstrations on both sides. This appeared to dispel the illusion that the younger generation, having enjoyed 17 months of peace and normality in Northern Ireland, were likely to be more conciliatory. De Rossa had developed on this theme, speculating that we might see a repeat of the situation in the early 1970's, when an ageing Republican leadership, which had shown signs of wanting to abandon violence, had been replaced by younger, more hard-line individuals.

COMMENT

7. Mr Hunter also said he intended to produce a full report on his visit to both the Republic and Northern Ireland, which he would send to us.

(Signed)

A J N Tansley

signed

ANITA SHANKAR
PRIVATE SECRETARY
13 JULY 1996