

23/02/98

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FROM: Mrs V E Sutherland, HMA Dublin  
DATE: 23 February 1998

cc: Personal for:  
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### THE TAOISEACH AND THE PEACE PROCESS

1. Since we spoke on Thursday, I have been reflecting further on the motivating factors behind the Taoiseach's approach to the Peace Process.
2. When Ahern came to power last year I recorded that, inspite of his family's Republican background, he himself was above all a pragmatist. Events have borne this out to a degree which has exceeded my expectations. Why?
3. First, Ahern, in common with every Taoiseach, would like to be the man responsible for that hitherto elusive achievement: an agreed settlement in the North. He leads a party the majority of whose members aspire to a united Ireland in the near future - 15-20 years is often mentioned as a reasonable time frame. He, however, knows (and there is collateral evidence for this) that his Government have neither the means to administer the North, nor the infrastructure to overcome terrorist violence, which poses a far greater threat to the Republic, with its indigenous IRA sympathisers, than it does to Britain.
4. Moreover, whatever Ahern may personally think about the ultimate desirability of a united Ireland, he has every reason to be wary of encouraging Sinn Fein in their political activities. His is the party which stands to lose the most if Sinn Fein were to gain a stronghold in the Republic. Sinn Fein support is increasing not only in Monaghan, where the single SF TD has his constituency, but also in Kerry (home of Martin Ferris), and in the deprived areas of Dublin where they are assiduous in cultivating support from disadvantaged young people. It is from Fianna Fail they will take votes, and perhaps further seats.
5. If Ahern is to achieve his objective of a settlement in the North which also ideally marginalises SF in the South, he has to tread a very careful path. Here his qualities as a negotiator and deal-broker stand him in good stead. He well understands that progress towards a settlement in the North is possible only when the British and Irish Governments work together. He must also calculate that it is in the interests of Fianna Fail to demonstrate publicly the unacceptable face of Sinn Fein. Left to his officials and David Andrews, the Irish would not have signed up to exclusion in the way that they did. His voice was also crucial in getting off 2 March at the possible return date.

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6. This analysis explains Ahern's clear determination to work more closely with the Ulster Unionists. As I reported at the time, Ahern told me some months before the election that if he could reach agreement with David Trimble on the key issues, this could form the basis of a settlement which would command sufficient consensus. More recently, the Irish Government dinner with Trimble and his colleagues seems to have kept his relationship with them on a positive footing. John Taylor's account to me - that the Irish Government were determined to cut a deal with the Ulster Unionists and SDLP within the next few weeks - may be unduly euphoric. But Mary Harney, although not present at the dinner, told me last week that it had been a constructive occasion, laying the foundation for a close working relationship.
7. Ahern also has to manage his tricky parliamentary situation, but here too appearances may belie reality. He may have a minority Government, but very few of his party care so deeply about the early achievement of a united Ireland that they would openly mount a challenge to him on the issue. That he, a Fianna Fail leader, has joined with us to exclude Sinn Fein from the talks without any talk of a back-bench revolt, speaks volumes for his authority. The main preoccupations of FF TDs are currently much more parochial (not least the survival of their Government via by-election success). Moreover, as Sean Donlon told me recently, John Bruton has given Ahern assurances that Fine Gael will support the Government in the Dail on current Northern Ireland policies, although they may raise questions about the manner in which these are handled. Provided therefore that Ahern can continue to demonstrate that working with the British delivers results, he can manage any parliamentary fall-out.
8. In all this, Ahern keeps his own counsel. I have been struck by the way he personally manages this whole process. He uses his two Ministers (Andrews and O'Donnell) and his gang for four (Teahan, Dalton, Gallagher and Mansergh) as it suits him, but he does not fully rely on them, and at tricky points he takes over personally. His subordinates have good reason to be wary of him. He can be ruthless, as demonstrated by his treatment of both Ray Burke and, more recently, Charlie McCreevy, Minister of Finance, both of whom he humiliated in the wider interests of the survival of the Government.
9. So what is my conclusion? That Ahern is critical to success in the talks, and more widely. A recent minute of yours rightly commented that we owe Ahern a great deal. Finding some way of expressing that to him at Thursday's meeting would count a lot, because we'll need much more from him before all this ends.
10. I hope this is useful as a scene-setter for Thursday. I will report again if any significant development intervenes.

(SIGNED)

V.S.

Veronica Sutherland  
Ambassador

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