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55/7659/95

SQ 12/96 Anglo-Irish conference

JLA/304/96/2

FROM: P N BELL
ASSOCIATE POLITICAL DIRECTOR (L)
16 November 1995

Mr Thomas

- cc PS/PUS (L&B)
- PS/Sir David Fell
- Mr Legge
- NI Perm Secs
- Mr Blackwell
- Mr Daniell
- Mr Leach
- Mr Shannon
- Mr Steele
- Mr Watkins
- Mr Wood (L&B)
- Mr Bramley
- Mr Brooker
- Mrs Brown
- Mr Canavan
- Mrs Collins
- Mr Cornick
- Mr Howard (Personal)
- Mr Maccabe
- Mr Perry
- Dr Power
- Mr Smyth, AIS
- Mr Stephens
- Mr White
- Mr Lamont, RID
- Mr Fisher
- Mrs Osborne
- HMA, Dublin
- Mr Lever, Cabinet Office

M'Donnell
To see
M

9/11

McGuan
see
SW 10/2
10/12

Miss Wilson

Mr Bell may wish to
touch base with you
on some of these issues
in a future

copied
SH
5/2
~~*Mr Miller*~~
~~*Mr Hayes*~~
~~*Mr Sullivan*~~
~~*Mr Shannon*~~
~~*Mr*~~

WORKING THE AGREEMENT

To file 9/6/2

Objectives

On Monday 20 November I shall be taking up my new post of Joint Secretary of the AI Intergovernmental Conference. Whether or not you share my predecessor's view that the Anglo-Irish Agreement has made the achievement of a settlement in NI more difficult, his conclusion that it is an immovable feature on the landscape is unquestionably right, and we must work it, so far as we can to our advantage. Against that background, my broad objectives, which are essentially compatible with those set out in MIS 12 and which I would however be grateful for a chance to discuss further will be to exploit, in support of the Office, the Anglo-Irish Agreement and the Secretariat machinery as fully as possible in order to:

- promote United Kingdom (and therefore NI) interests in respect of Northern Ireland as vigorously as possible; and,

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Miss Astle

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- maximise the area of mutual understanding and co-operation between ourselves and the Irish in respect of, and in the interests of Northern Ireland as a whole.

2. It will certainly not be my intention to operate the Secretariat as a goad to the NI administration generally, as has happened in the past - although it will involve ensuring Irish views and perceptions are brought, I hope sensitively, to the attention of the wider system. Rather, I hope to see the Secretariat being regarded as a resource for the NI system as a whole (as well as for the Irish side, who will no less need to have confidence in the integrity, authority and professional competence of the British side).

A cry for help

3. To do this as effectively as I intend will involve close collaboration with colleagues both in the NIO and the NI Departments (to say nothing of those farther afield, and in particular our Dublin Embassy). This will entail, in return, keeping the Secretariat fully - indeed rather better - informed of developments likely to be of significance in Anglo-Irish relations, and involved where appropriate in their policy making. (I shall also, of course, be continuing to operate as the Associate Political Director, Belfast and, with the Secretariat, remain an active player therefore in the wider political development process.) I would, therefore, in the early days of my new posting, appreciate your advice and guidance, as well as that of copy recipients on the best way the Secretariat can take these objectives forward.

4. Without promoting my own views in detail at this stage, there are a number of areas where there may be some scope for treatment. Some of these I list below; others you will find in MIS 12.

The Intergovernmental Conference

5. In marked contrast to the first few years of the IGC, the Conference meetings are now relatively routine affairs (although consuming large amounts of Ministerial and official time) whose significance a visiting Martian might conclude lay more in the fact of there being a Conference than in the substance of what is discussed. This is, in many ways, a constructive development - and mirrors the fact that the conferences are not longer, for instance, security events of the highest sensitivity and profile. But, to borrow Dr Conor Cruise O'Brien's characterisation of the UN, and without discounting the value of the IGC as "sacred theatre" I wonder whether we cannot make more of the Conference itself? (Agenda, format, attendance.)

6. One immediate issue on which I know the Irish side wishes to engage me, is the need for a communique. My own view is that although communique drafting is a tedious chore which you will have noticed I am only too happy to leave to others wherever possible, it is nevertheless a centrally important one. Without the communiques,

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there will be no record of what the IGC had discussed over the year; its discontinuation would, I suspect, be regarded with suspicion. There is a case for a shorter, less politically nuanced text. Equally, there is a case for a fuller communique. As the NI Guardian correspondent said to me this week, just to say, for instance, that "broadcasting matters were discussed" conceals (almost) as much as it reveals, and stimulates speculation accordingly.

Day to day business

7. The bread and butter of the Secretariat, as long as I can recall, has been responding to Irish requests for information (I will not say acting as a "complaints bureau") and being the impresario for briefings from the NIO and NI Departments. As we frequently have a very good story to tell, and one imperfectly understood in Dublin, it is essential that this function continues and is done as professionally as possible. I wonder, however, whether we could not collectively give further thought to such things as:

- subjects on which we wanted to brief the Irish, effectively instituting a tactful "education" programme; and,
- trying to be more proactive, certainly to the extent of asking the Irish about their law, practice and customs. I recognise that the text of the Agreement tends to support one way traffic. I know that previous Irish Secretaries have often been rather legalistic about such matters. But, if the Irish are sincere in their protestations about reducing divisions in Ireland, legalism is an unattractive posture for them. Certainly it does not reassure those most in need of reassurance including the NI administration. (MIS 12 already nods occasionally, you will note in the direction of greater proactivity.)

8. I am also aware that, since the AI Agreement was signed, there are other important channels of communication between us and the Irish - some of which are now much important than they were: notably the link between No 10 and the Taoiseach's Office, the Liaison Group, and the Dublin Embassy (which, in the immediate aftermath of the Agreement almost went off the air. We need accordingly a well understood and effective set of interweaving relationships, therefore. (This also is part where my concerns qua AIS overlap with the concerns I expressed in my recent minute to Mr Stephens about the "international role" of NIO.)

9. In short, I suggest that collectively this will be a good moment to review the effectiveness of the Conference system with a view to improvements. A start, for instance, might be for IPL to look at the 1990(?) review of the workings of the Agreement, to remind us of the lessons we thought we had learnt from the first five years and to suggest improvements now, and for the AIS to examine just what progress they (we?) have made in terms of the fine hopes of MIS.

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Some other improvements

10. One improvement that strikes me as long overdue is the de-mystification of the Secretariat and all its works. On the one hand I see a case, to which I believe Mr Wood is also sympathetic, for opening up the Secretariat in benign, even pedestrian mode to the media - an idea whose time may at last have come. At another level, I hope to exploit my position as the first non-Viperish Joint Secretary, to let myself be publicly - and well - known as the Joint Secretary - a process which began with the background briefing I gave, with some very useful help from Mr Wood, to the Guardian earlier this week (but which has not, so far, been reflected in print). We shall need, therefore, to consider separately and advise Ministers our policy in regard to publicity.

11. I hope I will not be accused of too much naivety if I express my hope that, by patiently chipping away at misunderstanding and prejudice, we can present a more reliable, and less alarming image of the Secretariat than still exists in many quarters. (On the other hand, I can see why my Irish colleagues might - for exactly opposing reasons - have a stake in some residual mystery.) My hope is that one can distinguish and present sharply the distinction between a normalisation of relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic and increasing co-operation where that is in the interests of Northern Ireland on one hand, and any sense of betrayal of Northern Ireland on the other. So I propose to trade openly and actively under my new colours in Northern Ireland including from my cardboard box on Bangor Prom. If my neighbours, or anyone else do not like it, tough.

Early warning

12. In connection with all the above, I also hope to build up a clearer picture - in so far as the wider political scene permits - of:

- issues that we want to promote with the Irish via the AIS;
- issues on which substantial briefings by us are likely (eg on housing);
- possible problem areas ahead.

The next steps

13. This note is intended as an annotated agenda rather than the kind of draft "business plan" I would like to put to Ministers once I have a clearer idea of the way forward. I do not, with the possible exception of IPL, expect any response in writing - though I would be extremely grateful for preliminary views from any quarter. What I would like to do, however, is to talk to you and some of the other key players, including the Ambassador, as to how the Secretariat and I can best take forward government policy on Northern Ireland. In this programme, I attach particular importance

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to asking each of the NI Permanent Secretaries how best the Secretariat can serve their interests given the importance I attach to our being a resource for them and my comparative unfamiliarity with some of the issues of chief concern to them. I am accordingly setting up a programme of "calls". I hope this can be extended to the Chief Constable, the GOC (and PANI?). I would similarly hope to make myself, with Mr Shannon's help, more familiar with prisons issues.

14. Once I have spoken to officials, I would hope to secure Ministerial blessing for the concept of operations we have settled upon. Thereafter, as you have already suggested, I strongly believe I should emulate my Irish opposite number by making my number, more formally, with Irish officials and Ministers in Dublin. (I shall, of course, be picking Mr Donoghue's brains first.)

15. I should also be grateful for any suggestions, not least from Sir David Fell and the Central Secretariat, on contacts I might most usefully seek to initiate or develop in Northern Ireland.

Conclusions

16. It is all going to be rather fun.

(Signed PNB)

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