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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

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ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT

BELFAST

SECRET

W. Harty

inc

24 July 1986

DL

*Taoiseach
Minister
Minister for Justice
Attorney General*

19629

Mr. E. O Tuathail
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

*Secretary
Mr. Nally
Mr. Ward
Mr. Russell
A-I Section
Aml. London*

Dear Eamonn

At our initiative we had a discussion in the Secretariat last night with a number of Stormont officials with a view to "clearing the air" on the political aftermath of Portadown. The people concerned were: Tony Stephens, Deputy Secretary of the N.I.O., who is the senior British civil servant permanently in Belfast and who is in charge of security and intelligence matters; David Gilliland, the Stormont Press Secretary who is regularly involved in political matters, and Brian Blackwell, the Assistant Secretary who works to Stephens and deals directly with the police and the army at the highest level. Elliott and Hewitt were also present. O Ceallaigh, Hughes and I made up the Irish side. The discussion took place over drinks and was, at our request, extremely frank and "off the record".

Blackwell, a sincere and unusually emotional Englishman who served as a Captain in the British Army in Northern Ireland in the '70s, said that the Minister's statement had had a severely damaging impact on the attitude of the police to the Agreement. He said he had been speaking to the Chief Constable, a number of Assistant Chief Constables and Chief Superintendents and that their attitude was one of very considerable resentment. The view in the RUC was that the Minister had no understanding of,

or sympathy with, their position and was "posturing" for his own political ends regardless of the consequences in terms of provocation and security. Blackwell felt that it would be a matter of years before what he saw as the damage which had been done to attitudes inside the police could be repaired. He said that the problem had been that the Minister's statement had directly attacked the police and had constituted a flagrant intervention into operational matters. In other words the very thing which the NIO had been seeking to reassure the police about i.e. that they were not in any sense subject to Mr. Barry in operational matters, had come to pass in the worst possible way. He said that his own staff who were all of a unionist background shared this reaction. He went on to say that the police and officials would of course do their duty but that there had been very serious damage done to the Agreement, particularly within the ranks of the police.

Gilliland said that he privately had believed that a confrontation with unionists should have been arranged in Portadown. He said that the "Prods" would have to be taken on sometime and that he had felt that Portadown was probably the best place to have this out. On reflection, however, he felt that the police decision, which involved a very limited march subject to very severe restrictions, had been taken, not at all with an eye to the political requirement of a confrontation at some stage, but with the exact opposite police concern of avoiding a confrontation. In those terms it had been a complete success and "a very clever move". It had been a great mistake for our Government to come in and attack the operational decision.

Stephens agreed with what Blackwell had said in relation to the impact of the Minister's statement on the police.

O Ceallaigh and I pointed out that the event which had been decisive last year in encouraging the Irish Government to overcome its doubts about British reliability was the handling of the Orange march in Portadown on July 12th. We said that

the Agreement itself was not in the Irish Government's view all that substantial and that the decision to go ahead with it had to be based on an assumption about British intentions. What had happened in Portadown this year had realised our worst fears: in other words the situation described by Geoffrey Smyth in the London Times last week as "responsibility without power" had come to pass. We said that we had been living for months with the frustration of inadequate progress under the Agreement, of concern about the handling of certain events by the RUC, of deep dissatisfaction with a series of statements made by the Secretary of State culminating in his disastrous Belfast Telegraph interview, and that throughout this difficult period we had been biting our tongues, sustained exclusively by the belief that the British would handle the 12th July in Portadown at least as well as last year and, we hoped, somewhat better. We said that we had explained to the British on the 12th that the Irish side was absolutely shocked and amazed by the decision taken the previous evening and that it would come to be seen as a negative water-shed in the history of the Agreement. We had made it clear on Saturday 11th that it was inevitable that the Government would have to say something in order to rally nationalist opinion, which had been devastated, and to prevent Sinn Fein exploiting the situation to the full. We said that as a result of the Secretary of State's meeting with me and my report to the Taoiseach, the Minister and the Secretary on the morning of the 13th, the question of a statement had been postponed. We asserted that had the British handled matters helpfully and sensitively from then on, viz. by taking a line which sought to balance the situation vis-a-vis the nationalists, it was possible that there might have been no statement from Dublin. There were two straws that broke the camel's back i.e. the Secretary of State's statement to Eamon Malley on Downtown Radio that nobody had spoken directly to him about the parade on behalf of Dublin and, secondly, the NIO briefing that no formal protest had been made by Dublin. These had inescapably conveyed the message that Dublin was relatively unconcerned about the Portadown decision and had, at most, acted in a purely pro forma manner. The Minister's position had been

made utterly untenable and he had no option but to make it clear where he stood. His concern was not with opinion in the South - his statement in as much as it was an admission of difference, was an admission of failure - he was only concerned to rally Northern nationalists. We underlined the fact that he waited several days before doing it and that he had made several supportive statements about the RUC in the aftermath.

The British side said that they had messages from the SDLP all over Northern Ireland, although not from Hume or Mallon (they did instance Feeney speaking to McConnell), to the effect that the Minister's statement was regrettable and had damaged the Agreement. We said we had heard "this one" before and that probably the most extraordinary signal of the depth of nationalist dismay was the fact that Hume commented publicly on the event on the 12th, something he had avoided doing on the day of an event for many years, in fact going back to Bloody Sunday. We said that Mallon had, on Hume's advice, absented himself from Portadown and gone fishing precisely so as not to be put under pressure to comment.

Blackwell said that he had been in frequent contact with Ms. Rodgers throughout the Friday, that he had himself not known what the police decision would be until late on Friday, that he had privately hoped (although he had not "of course" put this to the police) that the police would not allow the Orange parade along Garvaghy Road, but that he thought the decision should have been supported and was proved to be 100% correct. He particularly objected to the reference in the Minister's statement to "unequal treatment under the law" (Robert Andrew had made a considerable point of this earlier when speaking to me). He also said that the Minister in his subsequent statement (note: I believe he was referring to an interview) had praised the RUC but "damned" the Chief Constable. This had if anything made matters even worse in that it had underlined the intervention into operational decisions.

We said that at all times through the episode the Government had

meticulously refrained from offering views on operational matters. We believed that we had the right to address issues such as parades and marches and this was in fact confirmed in the agreed language of the Q. and A. paper prepared for Hillsborough which had specifically confirmed that we had the right to put forward views on parades and marches. The Minister however had, out of deference to the difficulties faced by his opposite number, agreed that he would not address parades and marches within the Conference in their operational aspect at this time. In everything we said, including the proposal that the Garvaghy Road parade be banned which was conveyed on the night of the 11th, we had scrupulously avoided the operational area. Gilliland said that we had briefed precisely to the contrary in the stories that appeared last weekend.

Blackwell said that he had not given Ms. Rodgers an assurance on behalf of the police at any stage that the parade would not go down Garvaghy Road, that he had never been in a position to do so, and neither had Nick Scott to the Minister.

The discussion on this point continued in a somewhat circular way, with a good deal of good humoured bitterness, for some time. We concluded it with agreement that each side understood the feelings of the other better and respected them. Elliott described the net British residual problem as relating to the precise nature of the statement issued by the Minister and particularly its attack on the police as opposed to the Government.

Security Co-operation

There was then a brief discussion (on which Sean Hughes is reporting separately) on British concerns about security co-operation. The British are very concerned indeed at the level of border-related IRA violence in the past few months. Blackwell said that Nick Scott had spent some time recently in the border police divisions and that the reports he was getting were that there was no improvement whatever in the actual

substance of border co-operation. There was greater bonhomie and greater social contact (he said that the two sides were drinking together more). He said that Scott also wanted to raise this at the Special Conference next week. We asked for specific instances of concern and we said that any general statement not backed up by specific instances would only infuriate Irish Ministers who were very conscious of the additional cost arising from border security co-operation and who believed that magnificent efforts were being made by the Guards. On the other hand, if the British drew attention to specific failures or omissions, Irish Ministers would be only too ready to ensure that they were addressed in the most serious way.

This was tossed back and forth and Stephens in particular agreed that it would be unwise for Scott to make unspecific general complaints in this area and that Scott would aim, if possible, to confine himself to specific matters and that we would be given notice in advance of what those matters might be. The specific issue of a PVCP in the Clady area was mentioned (Hughes is dealing with this).

Press Matters

In the recent fortnight we have had a protracted row with Gilliland about our accusation of the British side on the leaking of the story to Conor O'Clery of the Irish Times about the Minister's exchanges with King on King's Belfast Telegraph interview. Gilliland and I had a further joust on this subject which I think is now exhausted. Gilliland gleefully attacked us on leaks, concentrating on last weekend's newspapers, and suggesting that I was responsible for them. I answered him with a robust burst of strong personal abuse.

British Army in Derry

Towards the conclusion of the discussion we raised with Blackwell concern about the excessive profile of the Anglian

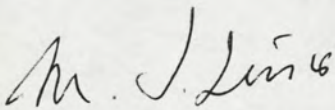
Regiment in Derry City. He said that he had heard about this already from Mark Durkan and was taking it seriously. He said the officer in charge had served under himself and that he would be in touch with him today to get him to cool it. He said he would be back to us about the matter.

Conclusion

It is important not to react too strongly to the British views as given to us last night and reported in this letter. I should stress that we had invited the fullest and frankest expression of views from their side. We think we gave as good as we got in terms, not alone of substance, but of heat. Elliott and I both agreed afterwards that it had been useful in the sense that it gave to both sides a pretty full flavour of the problems each had had to deal with.

Having said this, I would say that there is undoubtedly strong feeling on the British side - much stronger than I had suspected - and that this does not arise only in the case of Tom King. There is probably a problem in terms of police opinion and that is something the Minister will undoubtedly wish to bear in mind.

Yours sincerely



M.J. Lillis