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Personal & Confidential

20th May, 1981

Mr. David Neligan
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin

Dear Assistant Secretary,

On Monday last I called on Archbishop Silvestrini, Secretary of the Council for the Public Affairs of the Church (roughly the equivalent of Foreign Minister) concerning a matter which required a comparatively long discussion. When that business had been concluded, Msgr. Silvestrini asked about the situation in Northern Ireland.

His queries and his general attitude struck me forcibly as being those of a man genuinely puzzled by recent events and trends. Mention was made of the Holy Father's plea in Drogheda for the abandonment of violence and of Fr. John Magee's visit; violence continues, hunger strikes end in death yet he hears that members of the IR.A. are "good Catholics". They are not Communists, he went on, but it seems they have got some of their arms from Eastern Europe. I ventured the personal opinion that some at least of the P.I.R.A. now seem to favour violence for its own sake; that there is an element of anarchism in their thinking in that they lack positive ideas as to what form of solution they are really striving for and that others aim at bringing down not only British rule in Northern Ireland but also the Government in Dublin. I confessed I found it difficult to understand the mentality of these men.

In reply to the Archbishop's question as to whether I saw any likelihood of an early solution of the Northern Irish problem, I admitted that I saw no early settlement; my Government, I continued, attached importance to the series of discussions initiated by the two Prime Ministers; in the long run this dialogue should prove fruitful.

Having regard to the nature of the problem, Msgr. Silvestrini wondered if "re-partition" would not be proposed as offering a solution. I replied that successive Irish Governments had always been opposed to the idea. The two communities in Northern Ireland were so intermingled that deciding upon a new border would be very difficult and furthermore even in Belfast itself about a quarter of the population was Catholic. Msgr. Silvestrini did not pursue this line of thinking.

Turning to the H Block/Hunger Strike question, he wondered why the British Government remained so inflexible. While stating that, as he was aware, both the Irish Government and Cardinal O Fiaich have been appealing to the British authorities for a more flexible approach, I gave my opinion that London fears that any minor concession made would not prevent the continuation of the campaign by the P.I.R.A. for political status. However, I went on, an intervention by the European Commission on Human Rights, which the British Government appears to be willing to facilitate, might provide a means of effecting some improvement in prison conditions.

As I was about to take my leave, Msgr. Silvestrini mentioned he would be glad to see me from time to time as developments occurred in the situation. I shall be glad therefore if you will ensure that documentation on Northern Ireland prepared by your division is sent promptly to this Mission. I should also like to be advised of any particular points you would wish me to bring to Msgr. Silvestrini's attention. I should mention that at my request the Third Secretary called last week on Msgr. Tonucci, the Irish desk officer in the Council for the Public Affairs of the Church, and gave him the texts of the Taoiseach's Statements of 4th, 5th and 12th May on the Sands and Hughes hunger strikes; Msgr. Silvestrini had these with him when he received me.

I have been wondering why he raised the question of re-partition. As far as I know, this has not been put forward by any serious Irish political commentator though it has been suggested from time to time in the correspondence columns of "The Times", but even there such proposals have usually drawn the reply that the "mix" of the two N.I. communities is such that any less controversial or less "unfair" border would be very difficult to delineate. Did the idea occur to Msgr. Silvestrini on hearing of David Owen's opinion that the EEC should play a part in endeavouring to settle the problem?

Many European countries experienced the re-drawing of frontiers and the consequent exchange of populations after the two World Wars and I wonder if some British politicians are now thinking that re-partition, even if it would not furnish a solution in perpetuity, might at least give Britain a respite from the Irish problem for a number of years and make critical observers in Western Europe and North America believe that Britain was proposing a settlement which would be fair to both communities? Any comment you have on this would be welcome.

Yours sincerely,

Frank Coffey.