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13 May 1987

Mr. Eamon O Tuathail
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

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Dear Eamon

We gave a dinner last night in the Secretariat for Ian Burns, the new Deputy Secretary in the NIO. He is based in London but is frequently in Northern Ireland. Hewitt and Steele were with him on the British side. Lillis, Ryan and the undersigned were on our side.

Burns was not at the meeting with King which took place earlier that morning in London arising from the Tanaiste's request that public indications be given by the British side on certain matters which would be of assistance to the SDLP. He was, however, aware of the discussions which had taken place, and he had also seen the Tanaiste's letter to King. He said that they had concluded that there would be no difficulties in continuing the work following the last meeting of the Conference and in preparation for the next meeting of the Conference. Work would, therefore, continue in the Working Groups and the Secretariat and we should go ahead with the programme detailed in the Tanaiste's letter.

We then had a fairly lengthy discussion about the SDLP and the British general election. There is no doubt that the British agree with our view. Burns, in essence, presented the same argument as Elliott had the previous evening (reported in Lillis' telex 477) and talked of the difficulties which Ministers would have in making decisions on policy between now and the outcome of the 11 June election. There is a convention in British politics that outgoing Governments do not take policy decisions on the grounds that they would not wish to tie the hands of an incoming Government. We argued that whatever the point about taking decisions, it was certainly the case that a Government could announce their policies and give an indication of what they intended to do when in Government. On this basis, we argued that it was surely possible for the present British administration to say that if returned to power they intend to do certain things in Northern Ireland. Were they to announce some of the ideas which had been discussed in recent times it could be of immense benefit to the SDLP. Burns took the point

and agreed that it is possible for Governments to make promises rather than take action on policy issues between now and the June election. We are hopeful that they will therefore be able to make the kind of announcement which would be of benefit to the SDLP, particularly in regard to West Belfast.

Burns, whom I would guess is in his late 40's, has a Home Office background but has served very long periods in the Northern Ireland Office. He probably has more service there, of a more varied kind, than any other high ranking British official. He is proud of some of the areas with which he has been associated in the past. He claimed that he was, in fact, the creator of the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights and he was its first Secretary. He also referred to a trip that he and Bloomfield had made in 1974 to various European countries which have significant minorities including Belgium, Holland and Switzerland. He had not, however, been in the Northern Ireland Office during the negotiation of the Agreement and during the first 14/15 months of its implementation. He said since he took up duty at the beginning of this year he was particularly struck by the usefulness of the Secretariat as a channel of communication between the two Governments. He said that it enabled them to be in continuous close, and more or less immediate, contact and added that there was nothing like it before in his experience.

He was particularly concerned about misrepresentations of the nature of the Agreement by Unionist politicians, specifically in relation to Article 1. Unionists have chosen to represent the Agreement as a step on the road to Irish unity. He felt it would be necessary for the British Government to indicate clearly at some stage that this was not the case using the language of Article 1. We explained our difficulties with this approach. We stressed the importance that nothing be said in the period leading up to the Referendum, to the British general election and beyond. We drew his attention to the common approach agreed by the two Governments before the conclusion of the Agreement which can be found in the Question and Answer paper.

Burns also indicated that the British are keen to get some form of devolution going. He had some reservations about the Tanaiste's interview as reported in the Irish Times in connection with this. We also spent a long time on our concerns about the Irish language.

Yours sincerely,

Daithi O'Ceallaigh

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