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12 November 1998

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To: HQ
For: Secretary Gallagher

From: Belfast
From: Joint Secretary

COPY TO
MR. COLE
MR. BOUGHTON
MR. HICKEY
MR. COTTER
MR. O'HARA
MR. CALLAGHAN
MS. LARKIN

Subj: Normalisation statement

1. A meeting with Stephen Leach today provided a further opportunity to impress on the British side the dangers of proceeding with the normalisation statement on the basis of the draft shown to us.
2. The Secretary of State has since yesterday afternoon a formal note conveying the content of your message on this subject. We are told that she has not yet been able to focus on it (due to Cabinet commitments this morning) but that nothing further will happen in relation to the statement until officials have received fresh instructions from her in the light of our demarche.
3. Leach was, as usual, extremely circumspect and unwilling to speculate about the likely outcome to our representations. From a few hints he dropped, clarified in a subsequent conversation with Bell, my understanding of the position in relation to timing is as follows.

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The draft has not yet gone to the printers and three days will in any event be required for printing. The Secretary of State's original intention was to publish the statement next Tuesday, in tandem with announcements by the Chief Constable about the withdrawal of troops from Drumadd Barracks in Armagh and the closing of PVCPs in Bessbrook (a separate message refers). The strength of our representations, however, has forced a delay and, according to Bell, it is likely that publication will slip to later in the week.

We insisted on seeing next Monday a copy of the latest redraft, prior to any forwarding of the statement to the printers, so that we would be in a position to report to our Ministers whether the Government's concerns had been met and to give them

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an opportunity, if judged necessary, to intervene directly with the Secretary of State. Leach and Bell noted our request but, in the absence of instructions from the Secretary of State, could give no undertaking that it would be met. Privately, however, Bell speculated that matters would not move so quickly and that a meeting on Monday to discuss the revised draft should be possible.

4. On the substance, we went through the inadequacies of the statement as it stands at present, made a wide range of proposals for improvement (in particular indicative timings and more details of what is involved under each heading) and emphasised the latitude available if the statement is clearly predicated on continuing peace.

Leach responded with a number of points.

First, they believe that the draft has already been improved considerably in our direction and is much more "forward" than originally envisaged. (It will be recalled that Leach was the author of the first few drafts).

Second, they are determined to protect at all costs the Chief Constable's room for manoeuvre in responding to the level of terrorist threat at any given time. They fear that, even if the statement is predicated on continuing peace, it will in practice be decoded by Sinn Féin and others as a series of absolute obligations. If the Chief Constable feels unable to abide by these because of adverse developments in the interim, he will be exposed to serious criticism from the Irish Government and the nationalist parties - all the more so as he will be unable to divulge the security information on which he is basing his decisions. This could bring the two Governments into conflict on a regular basis.

Third, they have more than one constituency in which this initiative is intended to inspire confidence. They expect Sinn Féin in any event to rubbish the statement irrespective of its content. Making much of Sinn Féin's indifferent response to the Whiterock announcement, Leach held that the statement would be dismissed as "too little too late". Indeed, he expects that it will not "take the trick with anyone".

We rejected this reasoning on all the obvious grounds, warned of the consequences of an apparently casual approach being taken by the British Government to a formal obligation under the Agreement and pointed out that the draft as it stands is not

Ridiculous
defective

recognisable as a "strategy" in any normal sense of the term.

5. In detailed examination of the draft, the following points arose.

The British will state "with greater clarity" their objective of achieving complete normalisation by May 2000 (para 2). The steps set out in the indents in para 3 (a) to (c) are all intended to be sequential.

Leach indicated a willingness to spell out what "progressive defortification" entails and also what is meant by "the phasing-out of counter-terrorist military bases and other installations". The former involves the removal of mortar screens etc while the latter involves sequentially the withdrawal of personnel, the closure of the base concerned and its eventual demolition.

We pressed him to indicate a sequence in which the remaining bases would be closed down. He listed these as follows: Girdwood Barracks and various RUC stations in Belfast, patrol stations in Co. Fermanagh, some bases in East Tyrone, the observation towers in South Armagh and a number of PVCs. He could not, however, see language going into the statement which would give a clue to intentions in relation to these installations. Bell suggested a reference to "the gradual and progressive dismantling of bases in Belfast, County Armagh and other rural areas".

More generally, we pointed out that to group the envisaged measures into what would happen in a "first phase", a second phase and so on (leaving the duration of each unclear) would provide the Chief Constable with sufficient flexibility while still conveying a sense of an overall plan which the British Government intends to implement. This suggestion was also resisted as placing too much of a burden on the Chief Constable.

We pressed for the setting of precise objectives under each heading, e.g., that Army strength would have been reduced by a given percentage within a given timescale. Bell suggested that the Army section might note what is an average garrison strength in peacetime (as an indicator of the ultimate goal). Neither of these suggestions was acceptable to Leach, who felt that it would be dangerous to indicate even as an objective what the eventual garrison strength might be.

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6. The news today that there is to be a statement by the Chief Constable tomorrow of additional normalisation measures which will come into effect next week suggests strongly that the NIO are going for a minimalist statement, not significantly different from what we have been shown, which they expect Sinn Féin and others to criticise but whose shortcomings, they hope, will be camouflaged by the Chief Constable's announcements. It would not be the first time that this British Government has resorted to a diversionary exercise of this kind. We will endeavour to establish tomorrow how the Secretary of State has responded to yesterday's note and will continue to press the case at official level for a substantial strategy statement. It may be, however, that intervention will be required at political level early next week.