

D F A F T

PS/Secretary of State (L)

cc PS/Sol's (B)
PS/Ministers (L&B)
PS/PUS (L&B)
PS/Sir E Bell
Mr Brennan
Mr Burns
Mr Carvill
Mr Merifield
Mr Jackson
Mr Lyon
Mr Reeve

ACCESS TO GOVERNMENT MR GEORGE SEAWRIGHT

1. In her minutes of 24 and 30 August, Miss Marson records Mr Scott's unwillingness to meet or correspond personally with Mr Seawright, the Assembly member for North Belfast, as a result of his recent behaviour. Mr Scott invited the views of other Ministers on this proposed course of action.

2. Mr Seawright's controversial remarks were made on 29 May in a meeting of the Belfast Education and Library Board. In a discussion on complaints by Catholic parents about the playing of the National Anthem after school concerts, Mr Seawright was reported as describing such parents as "fenian scum" and saying:

"Taxpayers money would be better spent on an incinerator and burning the lot of them. The priests should be thrown in and burnt as well." (Irish News: 30 May)

The remarks came in the midst of the European Election Campaign and attracted widespread condemnation. The DUP withdrew the whip from Mr Seawright in the Assembly and he now faces charges of using threatening words with intent to provoke a breach of

the peace. Despite pressure from his former colleagues in the DUP to apologise and withdraw the remarks, Mr Seawright has consistently refused to do so and has reiterated them.

3. Access to Government policy

Normally correspondence from Members of the Assembly, whether or not they are participating Members, receives a Ministerial reply and Ministers generally agree to requests for meetings with Assembly Members. In respect of Sinn Fein, however, it is Government policy that Ministers should have no contact with their representatives, whether elected or not, as long as Sinn Fein continues to support the use of violence. But care has to be taken to avoid giving grounds for allegations of maladministration or actions under Section 19 of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973, which forbids discrimination on the grounds of political opinion. ^{In general,} Correspondence with elected representatives of Sinn Fein, therefore, receives a curt, formal and short Private Secretary reply. But letters which raise constituents' problems are dealt with adequately in the interests of the constituent, although the replies, which also come from the Private Secretary, remain brief and formal without any appearance of friendliness. Any requests for meetings between a Sinn Fein elected representative and a Minister are refused and the enquirer asked to put his views in writing. Ministers in charge of other UK Government Departments are advised to respond similarly. A copy of the latest detailed guidance on contacts with Sinn Fein is attached at Annex A.

4. Government contacts with Mr Seawright

As regards correspondence, there are no major objections to treating Mr Seawright on the same basis as Sinn Fein. He has been condemned

by his own party and repudiated by the unionist community. (There is a risk that other Assembly Members might make deeply offensive remarks and the courtesy of a Ministerial reply would have to be withdrawn from them also, but this seems very unlikely.) Ministers would therefore not respond personally to any letters from him, but letters which made representations on behalf of any of his constituents would be given a fair and adequate response. To ensure that Mr Seawright receives consistent treatment within the NIO and from Ministers of other UK Government Departments, a short circular would be needed.

5. As regards meetings, Ministers have made it clear that they will not meet elected members of Sinn Fein, even as part of a larger delegation comprising several parties. To apply this principle strictly in Mr Seawright's case would mean that Ministers would refuse to meet either of the two Assembly Committees (DFP and DBSS) of which he remains an active member. (He resigned from the Security Committee following his remarks.) Although Assembly Members repudiate Mr Seawright's remarks, such action could attract condemnation from the Assembly and would undermine the cordial and open relationship which the Government has sought to establish with the Assembly and its Committees. On balance, it seems best not to go down this path. But there are no objections to Ministers refusing to see Mr Seawright on his own or as a member of a larger delegation, provided it is not representing the Assembly or one of its Committees. (As the Secretary of State may recall, advice will be offered shortly on the relationship between Ministers and local councils, with the May 1985 local government elections in mind, and this could have a bearing on relations with Mr Seawright.)

6. Publicity

The Government has made its policy on contacts with Sinn Fein clear. A similar announcement that Ministers will cease to have direct contacts with Mr Seawright would make plain the Government's revulsion at his remarks. But there have been no public demands for the Government to cease contacts with Mr Seawright. Any public announcement would need to state the grounds for treating Mr Seawright in this manner: if reliance was placed on Mr Seawright's "incinerator" remarks, then this could be undermined if Mr Seawright is acquitted of the charges he faces. Any public announcement could also provoke questions about Government contacts with other politicians who have at times appeared to approach support for violence. A public announcement could also place the Government in a difficult position if the DUP were ever to rescind their suspension of Mr Seawright: Ministers would then be committed to refusing to meet any DUP delegations which included Mr Seawright. For these reasons I recommend that there should be no public announcement, at any rate for the time being.

7. Summary

I recommend that the guidance on contacts with Sinn Fein should apply to contacts with Mr Seawright. I suggest, however, that Ministers should not refuse to meet Mr Seawright as part of a delegation representing the Assembly or one of its Committees. A public announcement would raise difficulties and, for the moment anyway, seems unnecessary.