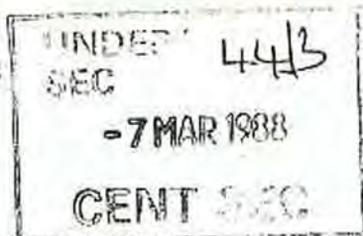


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cc Mr Hamill

Mr Burns BLIS



cc Mr Miles	BLIS
<del>Mr</del> Spence	BLIS
Mr Bell	BLIS
Mr Hewitt	BLIS
Mr Masefield	BLIS
Mr Wood	BLIS
Mr Watkins (personal)	

## BRIEFING THE IRISH/EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS

While I am reluctant to add to the small pile of correspondence that has flowed from your minute to me of 17 February, perhaps I could try to pull some of the threads together.

2. Our aim is to guard against unforeseen events complicating life on the Anglo-Irish front (though Pte Thain is a salutary reminder that we will never be able to predict everything) and we are charged with providing the Secretary of State with regular reports. (It is worth noting that already CPL provides reports for No 10 of forthcoming sensitive NIO issues on a weekly basis.) To that end we must take account of events on four fronts, and at present the scheme is that responsibility for each of those lies with different places:

- |                   |   |                     |
|-------------------|---|---------------------|
| 1. NIO (L)        | - | SIL                 |
| 2. NIO (B)        | - | Secretariat         |
| 3. NI Departments | - | Central Secretariat |
| 4. GB Departments | - | FCO (RID)           |

When each has gathered its information, the sequence of events (probably fortnightly) will be:

- Secretariat and Central Secretariat confer about 2 and 3.
- Secretariat representative travels to London.
- SIL, RID and Secretariat (and possibly Private Office) confer about events on all four fronts.
- SIL reports to Secretary of State.

3. We have to be aware that a number of meetings may occur where little new insights are gained. We already have lists of forthcoming events (Central Secretariat's, Press Office's, CPL's for No 10); and it will be relatively seldom that additional meetings will throw up new and significant events. Where we should, however, need to concentrate our effort is on means of identifying in advance events like the PT Bill and Pte Thain which are not showing up at present. And it is instructive that those two most vivid examples come from Departments other than the NIO, and did not emerge in the form of deliberate, pre-arranged announcements.

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4. I conclude from this as follows:

- i. within the NIO and NI Departments we already do much of the information-gathering work that is necessary for an Anglo-Irish early warning system. Let us use rather than duplicate that effort;
- ii. it is for those in Belfast to decide, not for me, but the necessary information may be capable of collection on a paper basis;
- iii. the most difficult area to predict will continue to be the GB Departments, where knowledge about forthcoming events will not necessarily reside at a single point (which can be the subject of a "ring round") - and indeed where there may be no realisation of Anglo-Irish sensitivity until it is too late;
- iv. therefore, whatever machinery is established, the most valuable safeguard will be the alertness of SIL to impending sensitivities, the appreciation of NIO, Central Secretariat and RID colleagues that SIL is the central clearing house for the early warning system, and their readiness to inform SIL (at formal meetings or otherwise) of relevant forthcoming events as soon as they have got wind of them, even though they may be some way off.

5. I do not wish to dictate how an information-gathering exercise of this kind should be conducted: it is better that those with direct responsibility for it devise the detailed arrangements. But I suspect that a year-chart on, say, Mr Whysall's office wall, onto which go details of forthcoming events as they are heard of (adjusted as their timing is confirmed or changed), and from which the fortnightly reports to the Secretary of State are drawn, would be an aid to the operation that would be least as valuable (and considerably less burdensome) than any number of meetings.

6. I note that the Home Office, in the wake of the PT Bill affair, has written to us suggesting that guidance would be helpful on how to spot situations which may give rise to Anglo-Irish sensitivities. You have been asked for advice. I imagine that, if this point was not covered in the joint ministerial letter, Mr Bell will be offering you a draft reply which refers to the ministerial letter and takes the opportunity of repeating the message that the NIO should be alerted to all forthcoming matters that may arouse Irish interest - not merely because of our "obligation" under the Agreement, but because of the capacity for mischief of any such matter if the timing is wrong. Incidentally, I would be loth to see the FCO and not the NIO presented as the Department to be informed of future events by other GB Departments. On both the PT Bill and Pte Thain, the NIO has a much more direct interest - and would be the more natural recipient of information through normal inter-departmental channels.

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7. Finally, all this depends on information being freely exchanged - above all within the NIO. If Ministers wish to be forewarned of forthcoming events, those charged with that task must themselves be fully in the picture about what the office - and that includes Ministers - are up to. Mr Watkins please note.

(Signed)

D CHESTERTON  
4 March 1988

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