

SECRET AND PERSONAL

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SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG

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Call by Mr Michael Lillis

1. In my minute of today's date to Mr Colvin I have recorded what passed between Mr Lillis and me at our meeting on 13 January on Co-ordinating Committee business and the Nangle affair. On other matters, Mr Lillis exercised visible self-restraint. But he said that he had discussed his visit to London with the Taoiseach the previous evening and had one or two things to say in consequence of that conversation. There were two clear messages which the Taoiseach had carried away from his tête-à-tête with the Prime Minister at the last Summit. Firstly, that her mind was not closed to new ideas; but secondly that she did not want any secret talks. The Taoiseach was anxious to respect the Prime Minister's wishes in this regard. He (Mr Lillis) had however been instructed to make it clear to us that the Irish Government's thinking was still along the lines which he had explained to me in our confidential talks during the run up to the November Summit. He hoped we had not been misled in this respect by anything Mr Barry had said to Mr Prior. (I took this to be a reference to Mr Barry's initial rejection of the possibility of amending the territorial provisions of the Irish Constitution.) The Taoiseach was also concerned about the impact which the Forum's report would have in London. He hoped that the Prime Minister would understand that the report was bound to take account of Mr Haughey's views and, in particular, of Fianna Fail's position on a unitary Irish State. This simply could not be avoided if there was to be any hope of getting Mr Haughey's acquiescence in the report, (which Mr Lillis was confident would appear before the end of February). No one knew exactly how the report would come out: but if things went as the Irish Government hoped, it would be in three parts. The first part would analyse the attitudes of the various parties to the problem with particular emphasis on Unionist preoccupations, which would be presented as fully and sympathetically as possible. The second part would identify a number of principles or criteria which any settlement of the problem must satisfy. These would include principles designed to take account of Unionist and British concerns - as well of course as Irish and



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Nationalist ones. Finally, there would be a third part which looked at a number of possible models for a solution. Mr Lillis emphasised that these would be strictly illustrative and that it would be made clear that the list was in no sense exhaustive. On present form it looked as if the models examined would be a unitary state; a federal or confederal state; and some form of governmental co-operation or joint administration in Northern Ireland. Mr Lillis asked whether a report in this form was likely to cause difficulties in London.

2. I did not attempt to probe Mr Lillis on what might be meant by "joint administration" in case this got us on to sensitive ground. I confined myself to saying that I was glad the Taoiseach had taken note of the Prime Minister's wish to avoid secret talks. The fact that we were averse to secret talks did not mean that we were not thinking hard about the problem. So it was helpful to know that the Irish Government's ideas were still broadly on the lines Mr Lillis had described to me last year. As regards the Forum's report, my own personal and off-the-cuff view was that the structure which Mr Lillis described seemed sensible. Provided that the analysis of the British/Unionist dimension was reasonably full and objective, and the "principles" were defined in a way which took reasonable account of British and Unionist concerns, the first two parts of the report would meet with an understanding reception here. The third part would obviously be tricky; but provided it was made quite clear that the models discussed were purely illustrative and that other solutions or approaches to the problem were not excluded, I thought that the impact here would not be hostile or dismissive. I wondered however whether Mr Haughey would not attach some tag to the 'unitary state' solution, to the effect that this was the only solution which he and Fianna Fail would be prepared to accept. Mr Lillis conceded that there was a risk of this but said that the SDLP (with the exception of Mr Mallon) were very much against it and he was still hopeful that Mr Haughey would be prepared to accept some sort of consensual report in order to avoid undermining the credibility of the SDLP. (I am very sceptical about this: but that is what Mr Lillis said.) I also said that it was important that we should have as much forewarning as possible



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of what the report would in fact say. Mr Lillis said that this was fully recognised and that everything possible would be done to get an advance copy of the report to us through HM~~A~~ Ambassador at Dublin.

3. Mr Lillis said that he had also been asked to express concern to me privately at reports that some British Ministers (possibly including the Prime Minister) were inclined to welcome what they saw as a move by Sinn Fein towards political activity and away from violence. The Irish Government's information was that Sinn Fein's attempts to create such an impression were purely tactical. Their objective was to secure more than 50 per cent of the Nationalist vote in the May 1985 local elections. Once they had done this they would be able to claim that their policy of seeking a solution by violence had been legitimised at the polls. This would put Mr Haughey and Fianna Fail over a barrel, since they would be extremely reluctant to continue dissociating themselves from those who could claim to be the legitimate spokesmen of the Nationalist minority in the North. The Irish Government's efforts to prevent Sinn Fein and the IRA attracting support in the United States would also be undermined. At the same time the Sinn Fein/IRA campaign of violence would be redoubled in the hope of stimulating a Protestant backlash and provoking a violent confrontation in the North from which they believed that the Dublin Government would not be able to hold aloof. Mr Lillis said that, although this belief was mistaken, the Irish Government would be put in an acutely difficult situation and the consequences for stability in the Republic would be grave.

4. I said that this provided a more plausible scenario for the Irish Government's anxieties than I had heard before. I realised that it was a recurring Irish anxiety that the British Government might be tempted into a dialogue with Sinn Fein. If Sinn Fein were formally to renounce violence (of which there seemed to be no sign) that would of course be seen in London as a welcome development and Sinn Fein's position as a possible political interlocutor would have to be looked at again. (Mr Lillis said that the same would be true in Dublin.) But as long as Sinn Fein remained committed to a policy of violence, I could assure him from my own knowledge that there was absolutely no disposition on



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the part of any British Minister, least of all the Prime Minister,  
to come to any sort of accommodation with it.

5. I propose, if you agree, to copy this minute only to Mr Coles  
at No 10.

*David Goodall*

A D S Goodall

16 January 1984