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FROM THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



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Private Secretary to
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Whitehall
LONDON
SW1

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

WHITEHALL

LONDON SW1A 2AZ

Mr. Butler
Mr. Fletcher
1) *Mr. Tumbell*
Mr. Barclay - for 17 January 1984
any further action necessary.

2) *Mrs Lyder* *CR*
3) *Miss Dover: please*
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DMS
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A.J.C. 18/1

Dear David

MINISTERIAL DEALINGS WITH SINN FEIN MEMBERS

I wrote to you on 1 August last year offering detailed advice on relations with Sinn Fein elected representatives, bearing in mind that, following last year's general election, Sinn Fein now has an MP.

In the light of further terrorist violence by the Provisional IRA and the attitude to this violence voiced by Sinn Fein representatives, Mr Prior has recently announced that Ministers will have no further contact with Sinn Fein representatives. We have, therefore, refined our policy on dealing with Sinn Fein members whether they are MPs, Assembly Members, councillors or have any other explicit links with Sinn Fein. In these circumstances you may find it helpful to have the following revised guidance although, as before, in cases of doubt or difficulty we suggest that departments speak to us before taking any action.

Our advice on 1 August was that Ministers in other Government Departments should decline any requests for meetings with Sinn Fein representatives. But under those arrangements there was a theoretical possibility that a Junior NIO Minister could do so. In present circumstances, however, Mr Prior has decided that no Northern Ireland Office Minister will meet any Sinn Fein MP or Assembly Member, or receive a local councillor or any other person with explicit links with Sinn Fein whether or not they are part of a larger delegation with other parties. In the light of this, we should like to confirm our advice on 1 August that any request by a Sinn Fein representative for a meeting with a Government Minister should be declined and the matter dealt with by correspondence (see below). As before, we should be grateful if departments would inform us of any requests for meetings with Ministers.

In developing policy towards Sinn Fein, Mr Prior believes it important not to give that organisation grounds for alleging maladministration or bringing an action for discrimination on account of political opinion under Section 19 of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973. Given that Sinn Fein is not proscribed, some reply has to be given to letters, particularly if constituents are not to be neglected. But in the light of the Government's general

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attitude to Sinn Fein it would plainly be wrong for Ministers to reply personally. We therefore suggest that a letter addressed to a Minister which is clearly from a Sinn Fein representative should invariably receive a curt, formal and short Private Secretary reply, while still dealing adequately with the interests of the constituent.

.... I attach for information a copy of a revised note on this subject which has been sent to Private Offices in the Northern Ireland Departments.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, and to the Private Secretaries to other Ministers in charge of Government Departments.

Yours ever

Dave

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To: Private Office Staff

APPROACHES TO GOVERNMENT BY MEMBERS OF SINN FEIN

1. Mr Russell's note of 26 July 1983 gave advice (supplementary to Central Secretariat Circular 5/83) to Private Office staff on the handling of approaches from Sinn Fein MPs and Assembly Members. This note develops present policy on Government contact with Sinn Fein in the light of the Secretary of State's recent public announcements: it is NOT for general distribution. It does not affect the question of access by Sinn Fein members to prisons and prisoners where the policy is unchanged. This note supersedes Mr Russell's note of 26 July.

Meetings with Ministers

2. Any request for a meeting between a Northern Ireland Office Minister and a Sinn Fein MP, Assembly Member or Councillor, (even if part of a larger delegation with other parties) should be refused and the enquirer asked to put his views in writing. A request for a meeting with anyone else with links with Sinn Fein should be referred for advice to the Secretary of State's Office who would consult Central Secretariat as necessary. You should expect such a request to be refused and you should therefore give no indication that the request is likely to be granted: you should aim to steer the matter towards correspondence. Ministers should not be advised to avoid visiting councils on their home territory simply because they include Sinn Fein councillors. But where such a visit is in prospect, Ministers should be warned of any possibility that Sinn Fein councillors might be present, and the Secretary of State's Office should be consulted in advance. If the visit takes place the Minister should be fully briefed and care should be taken to eliminate the risk of Sinn Fein making political capital out of such an event, eg a photograph of the Minister shaking hands with the Sinn Fein councillor.

Letters to Ministers

3. Letters from Sinn Fein MPs, Assemblymen and councillors addressed to Ministers should not receive Ministerial replies but

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should receive curt, formal and short Private Secretary replies (as should a letter from unelected spokesmen and party officers). Letters to Ministers raising constituents' problems must be dealt with adequately in the interests of the constituent, but should be brief and formal, avoiding any appearances of friendliness (eg phrases such as "thank you" for your letter of ..., or "I regret" that I am unable to grant your request, should be avoided). You need not be reluctant to give a negative answer when a negative answer is justified. For some letters (eg a brief covering letter to a document which has been widely circulated or a particularly abusive letter) a one sentence acknowledgement by a Private Secretary would be appropriate. You should pay particular attention to the style, substance and possible political implications of the replies (especially with letters dealing with broad policy issues). If you have any doubt about the content or tone of a letter, you should consult Central Secretariat.

Approaches to Officials

4. The normal response to telephone enquiries to Private Offices from Sinn Fein Members (or those claiming to speak on their behalf) should be to ask them to put the point in writing. In exceptional cases when the request cannot reasonably be dealt with in correspondence, eg an urgent request for compassionate parole to see a dying relative, Private Offices should refer for advice to the Secretary of State's Private Secretary who will consult Central Secretariat as necessary.

5. Policy is unchanged on approaches from Sinn Fein members to local offices, etc, concerning purely constituency matters which do not appear to raise wider questions of policy. These will be dealt with at local level in the same way as similar approaches from other MPs or Assemblymen. Staff have been instructed that if these approaches to go wider or if they have any doubts, they should refer them to their Minister's Private Office. You should in turn consult senior officials in your Department and Central Secretariat.

Whitehall Departments

6. United Kingdom Ministers outside the Northern Ireland Office may receive correspondence from members of Sinn Fein (whether an

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MP, Assembly Member, councillor or in any other capacity with explicit links with Sinn Fein). Where the Sinn Fein connection is apparent, the appropriate response should be a curt, formal and short Private Secretary reply as in the case of NIO Private Offices, and Ministers in charge of Whitehall Departments have been advised accordingly.

Central Secretariat

January 1984

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