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Ref: B06786

Mr Goodall

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Mr [unclear] 27/5  
Mr [unclear] 24/

SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG

RAA

396/2

Ireland

Mr Eyers of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office brought Mr Lillis (at the latter's request) to call on me on 20th May. Mr Lillis, who was diplomatic adviser to Mr FitzGerald during Mr FitzGerald's first spell as Taoiseach, has recently succeeded Mr Neligan as the Under Secretary in the Irish DFA responsible for Anglo-Irish relations and Northern Ireland. He was also accompanied by Mr Dempsey, the Minister at the Irish Embassy,

2. Our conversation lasted well over an hour and was very frank and open. Mr Lillis, who is a relatively young man (late 30s), is articulate and self-assured, and clearly close to Mr FitzGerald. His approach to the Northern Ireland problem seemed serious and, on the whole, realistic. I think he should prove a good interlocutor. He stressed the importance which the Irish Government is placing on the All Ireland Forum and was cautiously optimistic about the prospects of getting (unspecified) representatives of Unionist opinion in the North to participate in it. Although he confirmed that the Irish Government was hoping that fresh momentum could be imparted to Anglo-Irish relations as soon as the new British Government was installed after the General Election, he indicated that any major initiatives from Dublin would have to await the findings of the Forum, which would not be completed until the end of the year. It was not clear what the Irish were thinking of by way of movement in the meantime beyond some reactivation of the AIIC and public endorsement by the two Governments of the proposed Encounter organisation, both of which Mr Lillis argued would help to demonstrate to Irish opinion that relations between Dublin and London were back on course and that a climate favourable to further progress had been restored.

3. Three points from the conversation seemed to me particularly worth noting. Mr Lillis made it clear that Mr FitzGerald's Government recognised that the British dimension to the Northern Ireland problem required much more explicit acknowledgement from the Irish side than it had received hitherto:

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and he implied that the Forum's recommendations would have to make provision for this in various ways which would be hard for opinion in the Republic to swallow, including a continued link between the North and the United Kingdom. He also said (in answer to a suggestion that the Forum was liable to divert attention from the Northern Ireland Assembly) that the more of a fair wind the Forum received from London, the greater the chance that it might be instrumental in easing the SDLP (he implied, with Dublin's encouragement) into participation in the Assembly. Finally, asked what single, early gesture from a re-elected Conservative Government the Irish Government would most welcome, Mr Lillis (emphasising that he was speaking very personally) said the reappointment of Mr Prior as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Although the Irish Government had had their differences with Mr Prior, they felt he was a man who had won the respect of all communities in the North and had acquired a real understanding of the problems. His reappointment would be read in Dublin as a sign that the British Government shared Dublin's wish to resume the co-operative approach to the problems of the North which had been reflected in the Joint Studies.

David Goodall

23rd May 1983

A D S GOODALL

Thank you.

This is very interesting.

I do not think we need or should report this conversation to the Prime Minister.

RA 24.v.