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4 December, 1992

Mr. Sean O hUiginn
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin 2

Dear Assistant Secretary

I had lunch yesterday with John Steele. We discussed a number of matters - the following were the main points:

- 1) Steele's job: Steele, who has now got to know his job still finds it frustrating. There are a number of problems. The main problem is that the Chief Constable continues to maintain a "hands-off" approach towards politicians and civil servants. The information flow therefore is not anything like as good as it should be. Steele is working on this and is trying to make progress. He chairs a security committee which he has slimmed down (Deputy Chief Constable in charge of operations, CLF and usually three others, one from the Army, one from the Police and one from NIO) in the hope that it will produce a better flow of information. He has hopes of success but says that it is too early to be confident about this.

His relationship with Ledley is "not ideal". At a personal level he finds him agreeable but rather difficult at an official level. He described him as a "typical Whitehall bureaucrat" who tends to check what way the wind is blowing, politically, and then, basically, follows the breeze. He says that Ledley does not adopt a very planned approach towards his work. He is constantly "jumping in and out of things" and sometimes tends to major on the wrong issues.

- 2) Dealings with Secretariat: Steele believes that there could be a better information flow between the NIO and the Secretariat. He is not very happy with Confidence meetings, in particular, which he sees as a means whereby we get the opportunity to throw everything that has annoyed us in preceding months at the NIO and they simply go on the defensive. He feels that it would be better if we could select a few important items and try to agree how we could make progress, together, on them. He suggested that we might have what he described as

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"informal meetings", if necessary without any particular Agenda, about once a fortnight so that we could talk fairly openly about matters that concern us and thereby "head off trouble" as much as possible. While I have reservations about the notion of informality, I told him that we would certainly welcome arrangements which produced a better information flow and that we would particularly welcome anything which provided us with immediate information on major incidents. We could understand that they themselves wouldn't always have full information in the immediate aftermath of an incident but we would certainly value an arrangement whereby we could quickly be given whatever information was available. He has agreed to come here for dinner in the New Year to discuss these matters further and to try to get some arrangements for better information flow in place.

3) Minister Mates: He would be glad if Minister Mates could take a vow of silence at times. Steele has been responsible for arranging a series of dinner parties attended by representatives (usually four) of the Nationalist community and finds it most frustrating that, instead of listening to what these representatives are saying, the Minister insists on arguing. He thinks he is getting through with the idea that a little silence at times would be advantageous.

4) Talks with PIRA: I mentioned the suggestion made on Radio today by Sammy Wilson that NIO officials were engaged in discussions with Sinn Fein. Steele said that he certainly wasn't engaged in any discussions and was not aware of any. He added, however, that "I wouldn't necessarily know of course if discussions were taking place".

He went on to say that, if asked to do so, he would certainly be prepared to talk to Sinn Fein/PIRA. He said that because of his time in prisons he has probably "talked to more terrorists than anybody in Northern Ireland" and is convinced that, at some point or other, an effort must be made to talk them off the campaign of violence. He believes that there are elements who are most anxious to talk. The Government are put in an impossible position, however, by PIRA's insistence on continuing with the violence campaign.

5) Loyalist Paramilitaries: I asked whether the suggestion that Stevens had seriously jeopardised the intelligence flow in relation to Loyalist Paramilitaries was simply a police excuse for failure and a means for ensuring that they do not have another Stevens. He said that the suggestion that intelligence had been jeopardised was genuine. The Chief Constable is working very hard to restore the situation but it will take time.

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- 6) Pearse Jordan: He had very little to say about this case which we do not know already. The investigating Chief Superintendent is the man who carried out the recent Coalisland investigations. Steele believes that he will do his job in an objective, professional way. He anticipates that it will take some time to complete the investigation.

As to the circumstances of the shooting, he didn't appear to have very much information. He said that his understanding was that the policeman had reason to believe that Jordan was about to shoot at him - he turned around while running away and made a gesture which led the policeman to believe this. Steele wasn't advancing this as an excuse, but simply letting me know that this is the information which had come his way.

- 7) Appointment of Commissioner and Assessor: Steele is reasonably confident that Minister Mates will be in a position to announce these two appointments before Christmas. He was not prepared to give names - because neither appointment has been fully "sewn up" at this point - but said that he didn't believe that we could have any objection to either of the men now likely to be selected.

Both are being "vetted" by the police at the moment but he doesn't anticipate any difficulties from a police point of view. He said that he couldn't rule out the possibility, however, that the intended Commissioner's wife might be worried (and might perhaps object) when she is made aware of the threat assessment by the police. That assessment is not available, as yet, but Steele anticipates that the level of threat will be quite high. Interestingly, he said that he himself would be quite glad to take up the appointment if it were offered to him.

Remuneration terms have been settled (he wasn't prepared to outline the details) and we will receive the terms of reference very shortly.

- 8) Life Sentence Review Board: Our comments on this matter, of which you are already aware, were very welcome from Steele's point of view. Recommendations are submitted to the NIO by LSRR where they first go to Minister Mates, who makes whatever comments he considers appropriate, and then to the Secretary of State. The problem, as we were already told, was that "we now have two men who tend to take a harder line on these cases". As a direct result of our intervention, Steele felt able to approach Minister Mates and firmly make the point that not only was the change of approach causing a political furore but ran the risk of destabilising the Maze. All of the recommendations submitted in the last batch were accepted. I asked Steele if it was simply a matter of

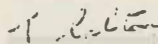
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change in approach by Ministers or whether there was anything in the suggestion that we were now dealing with cases which were genuinely more difficult. He confirmed that the cases were in fact more difficult. Virtually all of the "drivers and look-outs" have now been released from prison and its getting down to a hard-core of killers. The rate of refusal, therefore, would tend to be a little higher. He made the point that the average term served by lifers has been steadily increasing; I have not looked at the figures but he believes that the average has gone up by about 6 months each year.

- 9) Identity badges for soldiers: While stressing the need to maintain confidentiality on the issue, he said that Minister Mates, on his own initiative, has for some time been pushing the idea that soldiers should carry identity badges (numbers rather than names). He believes that Mates is on the verge of a breakthrough on this front and that an announcement may be made before Christmas. His own "job would be on the line" if we were to indicate that we had knowledge about this before the Mates Statement is issued.
- 10) Incursions: Their "system" is generally agitated by our constant flow of queries on incursions. I explained that there was a sovereignty issue involved and that there was also of course the whole question of responsibility in the event one of their people was injured in the South. He said that he understood all of this but, at the same time, felt that it would be preferable from the point of view of developing good relations if we could avoid raising incidents where the incursion was minor and clearly the result of error.
- 11) Ledley's post - succession: Ledley is due to return to the MOD next year but Steele doesn't believe that he or any other Northern Ireland civil servant will succeed to the post. He believes that the MOD will fight "tooth and nail" to hold the post.

Yours sincerely,


Tim Dalton