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AA44/2
17, GROSVENOR PLACE.
SW1X 7HR
Telephone: 0171-235 2171
Direct Line: 0171-201 2
Fax: 0171-245 6961
②5

16 December 1996

Mr. Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

COPY TO: YE
PST
PSS
MR. P. TEAHON
MR. S. DONLON
MR. T. DALTON

Dear Secretary,

Conversations with American Embassy officials

At the weekend, at a Christmas eggnog party at the home of Blair Hall, I spoke about the peace process with American Embassy officials. These conversations were continued today over lunch with Hall, who as host found it difficult to converse freely at the party.

Northern Ireland and the new administration

Anthony Lake and Nancy Soderberg, who normally speak to the American Embassy in London two or three times a week, have failed to be in touch for about two weeks.

It is assumed that President Clinton, because of his personal commitment to the issue and because of his friendship with people like Christopher Dodd, will want to maintain the US interest in Northern Ireland. How this will be expressed in organisational terms is unclear. Anthony Lake in his new capacity is unlikely to be involved. Sandy Berger is considered to be a first rate "staffer" who will fully reflect any sense of priority communicated by the President. Nancy Soderberg's position in the new administration is yet to be decided.

A point that was made to me is that there is more scope than previously for Northern Ireland to be handled in the State Department as a mainstream issue -

although at a level of importance below, e.g., Bosnia, China and NATO enlargement. Tensions between the US Embassies in London and Dublin at the official level have been resolved and there is a satisfactory pooling of information. British resistance to an American input on Northern Ireland is still palpable in some circumstances, but what was described to me in American footballing language as the use of the straight arm, is now less frequent.

Another point that was made to me is that the more active and promising the political negotiations, the more significant the American role. Within the peace process George Mitchell and his staff have the scope to espouse particular ideas. On the other hand, the more the Republican movement allows the situation to be presented by the British government in security terms, the more delicate the American role becomes. It is dangerous for the Americans to seem to call into question the policing and security policies of a close ally.

I picked up the rumour that a businessman called McNamara, a friend of the Daleys of Chicago, is being mentioned as a possible successor to Ambassador Kennedy Smith - although it was jokingly said that Mr. McNamara, who is unknown to the American Embassy, may be paying someone to put the story around.

The United States and Hume/Adams

Blair Hall confirmed over lunch today that the US administration is disappointed at the the Prime Minister's failure to agree to a date for the inclusion of Sinn Fein in the talks following a credible ceasefire. Hall implied that while the British are aware of American feelings, the Embassy has not gone to particular lengths to perpetuate the debate on this subject subsequent to the summit on 9 December. Hall spoke in still stronger terms of the publication of the British paper on 28 November. Appeals to desist [comment: I took it these appeals were made by the American Embassy in London] were greeted on 26 November, two days before publication, with the response that the train was moving and that while the Americans were welcome to lie down on the track, it would not be an advisable thing to do. It has been unfavourably noted in Washington that publication of the statement coincided with Thanksgiving, making it that much more difficult for the US to react.

Hall told me that this afternoon, Monday, his Ambassador is to see the Prime Minister (or possibly John Holmes, if Mr. Major's schedule is too tight), for an update on a number of subjects including Northern Ireland. Ambassador Crowe

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is then to brief President Clinton on Wednesday. Hall said that his Ambassador regards Northern Ireland as one of the two or three most important subjects in his brief.

As regards a possible American role in restoring the ceasefire, Hall said that the willingness is there but that neither Sinn Fein nor the British government appear focussed on the American role and that on the British side there may even be some reluctance to use American good offices [comment: by contrast Jonathan Stephens of the NIO, in our conversation on Friday, suggested that the Americans might act as guarantors of mutual good faith between the British and Sinn Fein.]

Hall went on to make a point which I did not fully understand about the weakness of American information on Republican thinking. What I thought him to imply was that contact between Rita O'Hare and the US Embassy in Dublin is their main channel and that the Americans may not have definitive knowledge.

Officially, Hall said, the American position as of now is that they stand willing to do what they can to "interpret" the British government to Sinn Fein and vice versa. This falls short of acting as guarantor.

I asked Hall how they now interpret Mr. Major's position. Hall put some weight on the domestic political constraints on Major [comment: I had the sense the Americans feel they have been rebuffed over the publication of the document and the setting of a date for ephemeral reasons]. But the Prime Minister is in good faith and may well be willing, if circumstances permit, to bring Sinn Fein into negotiations. What is for judgement is whether the difficult political circumstances at Westminster will give the Prime Minister the opportunity he wants.

The talks in Belfast

Hall sees a link between what is happening in Belfast and the prospect of including Sinn Fein in negotiations. If an agreement can be reached to open substantive negotiations after the Christmas break, this should constitute an important incentive for the Republican movement to get involved.

As I reported by telephone at the weekend, Hall had lunch with Martha Pope on Friday and had a meeting with Ken Maginnis on Wednesday.

The American view is that as far as Maginnis and Empey are concerned, the

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SDLP/UUP/Alliance paper on the terms of reference for the Committee and the Commission is a free-standing exercise and is not contingent on any additional and hidden UUP proposal on prior decommissioning. On this basis, the strong feeling of the Americans is that the SDLP should move quickly to consolidate the emerging agreement.

It seems that Maginnis assured the Americans that Trimble is looking for an early settlement to the decommissioning issue with a view launching substantive negotiations. Maginnis did not say however that Trimble has seen and approved the new piece of paper. There is some anxiety in the UUP that John Taylor or others might seek to unravel what the negotiators at Stormont have achieved. There was to be an important meeting at Glengall Street on Saturday afternoon involving MPs and party officials.

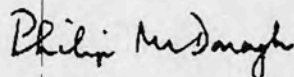
Michael Collins the movie

Hall engaged me, as some of the guests at his party had done, on Neil Jordan's movie. One of the questions in Hall's mind was whether Jordan has taken too much for granted the fact of there being a full-scale guerilla war in Ireland from 1919.

Martha Pope and "dirty tricks"

Hall said that Martha Pope, over lunch on Friday, was still not fully reassured as to the role of the British government in the recent affair. Comment: You will by now have seen the detailed reconstruction in Saturday's Guardian of events surrounding the publication of the various articles defaming Pope.

Yours sincerely,



Philip McDonagh
Counsellor