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6 July 1999

No of pages including this one: 3

To: HQ
For: Secretary Gallagher

From: Belfast
From: Joint Secretary

Read
MK
7.7.99

Subj: Conversation with Joe Pilling

1. Joe Pilling, the Permanent Secretary at the NIO, came to dinner in the Secretariat last night.

2. The following are the main points of interest which arose.

56.2 BR

Unionist attitudes towards "The Way Forward"

3. Pilling was struck by Trimble's failure to press for a longer period for consultation on last Friday's document (i.e., to seek a delay in the scenario envisaged from 15 July onwards) during his exchanges with the Prime Minister in the Commons yesterday.

4. This has suggested to the NIO that the UUP leader will concentrate his efforts on improving the failsafe legislation from a Unionist perspective. Pilling assured us, however, that the Prime Minister will not yield to pressure to insert an exclusion clause. (Note: A similar message has been conveyed to us this morning via Nigel Warner on the Secretary of State's behalf). Not only does Blair recognise that an exclusion clause would go outside the Agreement, and violate a clear understanding he has with the Taoiseach, but he also believes that suspension of the operation of the institutions is objectively the right way to proceed.

5. Pilling was aware of our concerns arising from the summary note on the draft Bill which we received yesterday. He preferred, however, to leave this discussion to

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the meeting of officials arranged for this afternoon. He mentioned, incidentally, that John Sawers wrote to the NIO on Saturday morning to say that the Prime Minister wanted draft legislation to be prepared by Sunday, with a view to agreement with all concerned on Monday. Pilling suggested that, while it might be politically desirable, this timetable did not belong in the real world and was causing consternation among the Parliamentary draughtsmen.

6. He was in general doubtful about the prospects of the Unionists buying into last Friday's proposal and expected that there would be great uncertainty about their intentions up to the last minute. He indicated that a halt in prisoner releases has now moved up the British Government's agenda as a possible sweetener for Unionists to get them across the finishing line.

Cabinet reshuffle

7. Pilling believes that, had it not been for his preoccupation with the Castle Buildings talks last week, the Prime Minister would have announced a Cabinet reshuffle last Thursday (1 July).

8. He hinted that an announcement may be expected within the next week or two. He claimed to have no knowledge of where Mo Mowlam might be heading but said that she is hoping for the Foreign Office. He thought that her departure from Northern Ireland would not be immediate, in order to signal that the move is unconnected with Trimble's current campaign against her.

9. As to her successor, Pilling did not disguise his hopes that it will be Peter Mandelson. He listed three reasons why he thought Blair might opt for Mandelson (who, as you know, is the Unionists' favourite for the post). First, the arduous nature of the Northern Ireland assignment would help to mitigate the criticism which will inevitably greet Mandelson's return to the Cabinet. Second, the job calls for exceptional political skills - it is "the most political job in the Cabinet after Prime Minister" - and Mandelson would probably be on a par with Mo in this respect. Third, given his own deep involvement in this area, the Prime Minister will need someone with whom he is personally on close terms and who is very loyal to him. After Mo, there is only really Mandelson who fills this bill. Nick Brown, the Agriculture Secretary and an astute former Chief Whip,

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would meet the requirement of political nous but would be seen as a Brown loyalist.

10. Pilling does not see Paul Murphy being promoted into the job. Without linking Murphy's name to the post, he observed that a new Secretary of State for Wales will have to be appointed shortly. (Alan Michael is currently both Secretary of State and the First Minister in the Welsh Assembly, a state of affairs which clearly cannot continue for long).

11. He is certain that a full-time post of Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will continue after devolution. This is partly because, with the number of Ministers of State at the NIO reduced by two, the Secretary of State plus the surviving Ministers (currently Murphy and Ingram) will be fully stretched with the remaining work and responsibilities, including e.g. a permanent "duty Minister" presence at weekends. Pilling believes that the concept of a single Secretary of State for the devolved regions will not be activated until after the next election.

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