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30 March 1993

- cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B
- PS/PUS (B&L) - B
- PS/Mr Fell - B
- Mr Thomas - B
- Mr Ledlie - B
- Mr Steele - B
- Mr Deverell - B
- Mr Watkins - B
- Mr Leach - B
- Mr Marsh - B

[Handwritten signature]

*in Quinn
if agrees no need
for action on it.
1.4*

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PS/Mr Mates (B&L) - B

SUN ARTICLE, 28 MARCH: "IRA'S EVIL UNTOUCHABLES"

John Fee, Crossmaglen SDLP Councillor and Seamus Mallon's right hand man (who is incidentally also the late Cardinal's nephew) rang me yesterday evening and again this morning in a state of some anger and indeed anguish about the article on pages 4/5 of the Sun (copy attached) in which the newspaper claims to have full details of PIRA members in South Armagh, and gives some information - Christian name and initial of surname; family details; and employment in some cases - about 13 individuals including a "American business man" now living in Northern Ireland who is alleged to be a former Green Beret and coach for PIRA's snipers.

2. Mr Fee said that this article was the talk of the area; and that at last night's Council Meeting, Sinn Fein had repeatedly stressed that the article was a direct result of local people giving information to the police. On top of other recent articles (eg the John Edwards piece in the Mail) it confirmed local feeling that the Army were deliberately blackening the area, and aroused anxieties that they were setting people up for Loyalist attacks. This atmosphere did nothing to improve relationships between the police and the community, or for those trying to use constitutional means to advance the well-being of the area. I sympathised; said that the

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...if the material would be investigated; that press freedoms to publish were of fundamental importance, though it was admittedly hard to see what justification there was for such articles; and assured him that the Army Authorities would not countenance any leakage of official information - the sensitivity of which was fully appreciated.

3. More generally, I wondered aloud whether the Council had given any thought to briefing reputable newspapers on good news stories in the area - perhaps in conjunction with official agencies such as the Tourist Board or LEDU - so that there would be some counterweight to the Sun/Mail approach. He did not seem terribly optimistic - but it might nevertheless be worth initiating something from the Government side, (perhaps through the Rural Development Initiative?) to see if the Council would be prepared to play a part. Certainly there is a problem, in that the area feels unloved by the authorities, and a bit of tender loving care might go a long way.

4. I digress. Back to the onions (and the tears). The fears and concerns Mr Fee expressed are real ones - in some ways they are the essence of the confidence agenda. Clearly there ought to be a full investigation into the source of the Sun's story. I understand from a contact in the Ministry of Defence that this may be a comrade of Lance Corporal Dickson, 1 Royal Scots, killed by a sniper in Crossmaglen; there have been snippets in the Sun since his funeral, thought to emanate from contacts made by a journalist at that event. However, yesterday's article goes far beyond such idle tittle-tattle. It is detailed - though possibly of doubtful accuracy - and if (as seems indisputable) based on official material, it represents a serious breach of security.

5. If the source can be identified, then proper action against the culprit, and to ensure (so far as possible) that there is no repetition, is highly desirable. Ideally the results of any such investigation ought to be communicated to Mr Mallon, if not more broadly, in order to restore some credibility to the security forces' often expressed disapproval of security breaches.

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However, the problem is may well be in getting the Ministry of Defence to take the issue seriously enough to investigate it fully, and to act on the results - especially as the Royal Scots have now left, and are on leave and preparing for draw down to a single Battalion.

7. Doubtless, Mr Mallon will raise the issue either with NIO Ministers, or with the Ministry of Defence; and he will no doubt also raise it through the Secretariat. There may be (at least political) advantage for NIO Ministers in making an early and unprompted approach to HQNI, expressing concern about the origin of the article, and considerable disquiet at the long term and harmful effects to the counter terrorist effort of such leaks, which glorify terrorists, portray the security forces as bumbling incompetents, and damage prospects of community support for the Government generally, and for the security forces in particular. Hopefully, this might ensure that a thorough investigation is initiated, and that a fairly prompt and full response can be sent to the expected formal approaches by Mr Mallon; at least, Ministers will be able to say that they have already asked for an investigation and expressed concern.

8. Meanwhile, the public line to take must be to express disquiet at the possibility that the article was based on official material; saying that it will be investigated; if this is found to be from an official source, that appropriate action taken; and repeating that the Government and security force commanders have made it clear that breaches of the strict rules governing sensitive material will not be tolerated.

(signed)

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