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18 MAR 1997
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FROM: P N BELL
JOINT SECRETARY
14 MARCH 1996

ASST 0839573
SEC 19 MAR 1997
CENT SEC

Mrs McLaughlin 24/3

Mr Deane 20293

~~286/96~~

423/97

- cc: PS/Sir David Fell B
- Mr Thomas B
- Mr Steele B
- Mr Leach B
- Mr Stephens B
- Mr Watkins B
- Mr Wood (B&L) B
- Mr Beeton B
- Mr Brooker B
- Mrs Collins B
- Mr Hill B
- Mr Lavery B
- Mr Maccabe B
- Mr Perry B
- Mr Priestly B
- Mr Lamont, RID B
- Mr Sanderson, CO (via IPL) B
- HMA, Dublin B

C

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(P-)

PS/PUS (B&L) - B

"SNOG OF A LIFETIME" - LUNCH WITH DR MOWLAM

The prurient will simply have to read on. But, first you should know that, accompanied by Mr Nigel Warner, Dr Mowlam was the guest of the Secretariat for lunch earlier today. Mr Fisher and I were there for the British side; Mr Dowling, in Mr Donoghue's absence skiing, for the Irish. It is not quite clear whether other members of the Irish side were absent on orders, because they were frightened of missing the plane back to Dublin, or because they simply couldn't be bothered. A bit of all three, it seems.

2. Speaking to notes of her own, which reflected closely however my own "briefing letter" of 13 March (not to all), Dr Mowlam made a number of important points by way of an 'opening statement', including:

- (a) a future Labour Government would be committed to maintaining a good working relationship with the Irish;

- (b) the balance of change in Northern Ireland was in a Nationalist direction; it was therefore all the more important to address Unionist concerns where we could. One set of their worries centred round Maryfield, which could not however be addressed exclusively in isolation, but only in the context of an overall "strategy"; and
- (c) a Labour Government would support an inclusive Talks Process - indeed would make particular efforts to bring Sinn Fein in; but,
- (d) they were no less attached to the principle of consent (Unionist, not simply Nationalist), and recognise the need to take Unionists with them if there was to be a negotiated political settlement.

3. There was thereafter a good deal, perhaps too much, discussion of what Maryfield actually did - concentrating, partly because Mr Dowling was the Irish protagonist - on the detailed complaints about the Security Forces in Newry, Bessbrook et al. And I am not quite sure whether, in the time available to us, we brought out sufficiently with the way in which in effect the Secretariat - plus, the all important link between No 10 and the Taoiseach's Office - was the other key channel (leaving aside the Talks process) between HMG and the Irish Government on Northern Irish affairs.

4. Messrs Dowling and Warner were however taking more notes throughout than was compatible with a purely social lunch; it would be quite interesting to learn the main messages they took away. (I tried by the way to reinforce with Mr Dowling later the key points registered above - laying particular emphasis on Dr Mowlam's clear drift that the Irish should not expect a Labour Government to work against, but with all the political parties, and therefore the Unionists in Northern Ireland). Nothing was said that I recall about 'lime frames', 'joint initiatives' from either side.

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5. Two clearly political points to which, as a Civil Servant, I closed my ears even though unaccountably I had helped set them up, were, first, that Dr Mowlam expected the "bi-partisan policy" to collapse "within two days" of a new Labour Government in part owing to the 'natural affinity' between Conservatives and Unionists. Faced with some for the horrid scenarios of the summer, including HMG being urged on by Nationalists/Sinn Fein (after a ceasefire) to face down militant Unionists at Drumcree, she could easily envisage all the GB press denouncing a Labour Government [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. In such circumstances she could see herself only lasting three months in the job. Second, she explained that Labour backbenchers had been deeply affronted by recent Unionist behaviour. Mr Dowling lit up with pleasurable anticipation, like a hedgehog in heat. "Why" he asked. "Because they hadn't brought the Government down". Nothing, but nothing as subsequent discussion revealed, about Unionist attitudes in the Talks or more generally. This insight into the Westminster mind was in the context of an argument that while Labour could coerce its own backbenchers (an interesting thought in itself), Unionists could not be coerced

6. In short, the note which I hoped Dr Mowlam would strike - a constructive relationship with the Irish, but do not expect a Labour Government to follow a simplistic Nationalist agenda - was struck. The Irish will also have to think hard about demystifying Maryfield ("don't just bring in the 3,000 Great and Good, what about the sixth form debating societies ...").

7. There is some follow up here: we have, I believe, a mandate to think "strategically" about "debunking the bunker" (and notice has been formally served on the Irish side). It is also apparent, as Mr Warner explained to me in the margins, that Dr Mowlam is understandably bemused by the way the system, in its wider sense, actually works. I am therefore booking myself a long, explanatory session with him - which may be time very well spent indeed. You will also wish to note that Dr Mowlam prefers doing business "dry" to be followed, if necessary, by a not necessarily wholly teetotal entertainment: work first, pleasure later. Which brings me to the osculation.

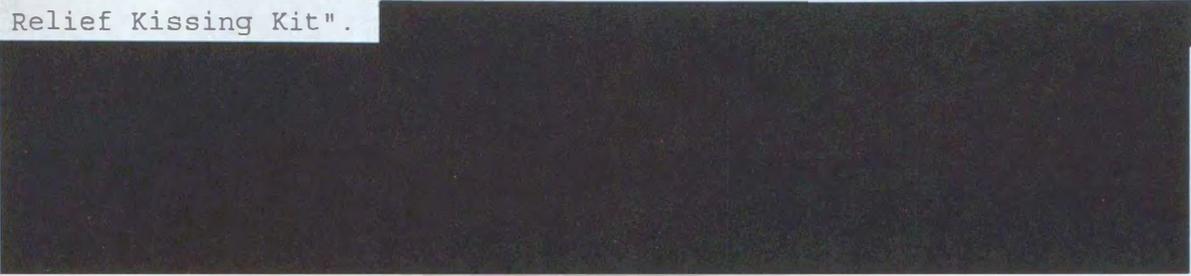
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8. Dr Mowlam opened proceedings, before going on to her mission statement, by presenting both Mr Dowling and myself with a "Comic Relief Kissing Kit".



Signed:

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