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M: P N BELL
BRITISH SECRETARY
3 MARCH 1997

- cc PS/Secretary of State (B&L) - B
- PS/Michael Ancram (B&L) - B
- PS/Sir John Wheeler (B&L) - B
- PS/PUS (B&L) - B
- PS/Sir David Fell - B
- Mr Steele - B
- Mr Leach - B
- Mr Stephens - B
- Mr Watkins - B
- Mr Wood (B&L) - B
- Mr Beeton - B
- Mr Hill - B
- Mr Lavery - B
- Mr Maccabe - B
- Mr Perry - B
- Mr Priestly - B
- Mr Whysall - B
- Ms Bharucha - B
- Ms Mapstone - B
- Mr Lamont, RID - B
- HMA, Dublin - B

Mrs McAuley 6/3
Mr Donoghue
WD6/3

by [signature]
C

MR THOMAS - B

DEBUNKING THE BUNKER

"The Pete and Dave Show" is not to everyone's taste. Few soap operas are. But scriptwriters, even the tackiest, sometimes stumble on truths denied to their more pompous colleagues. In my case, recent exchanges with Mr Donoghue over the question of how, in his case almost whether to answer PQs has drawn attention to a number of interesting Irish concerns - both about "demystifying" Maryfield and Irish attitudes to a possible future Labour administration.

2. In my recent discussions with Mr Donoghue I have, I hope and believe, been entirely consistent in my defence of answering Parliamentary Questions with the degree of minimal frankness that has characterised recent replies to Mr McCartney (the kind of less forthcoming approach which Mr Donoghue characterises as typical of Dail answers to questions from hostile TDs is not, so far as I can judge, part of our political tradition). Even though I am happy to judge each individual case on its merits, I believe the wider

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underlying principle is now understood - if hardly welcomed - by my Irish colleague.

3. On the other hand, I do agree with his contention that we should distinguish, in our own minds, between what we believe we have no option but to say by way of answers to PQs and what we should be doing to promote a more realistic public understanding of Maryfield. About which, as you know, I inaugurated a spasm of internal minuting which I hope to pull together shortly. The tentative conclusions of that minuting, subject to any views that Mr Wood may still wish to inject, is that our room for manoeuvre is limited, and our scope for doing more than what we have been trying to do recently (e.g. drawing attention to the fact there is a British presence at Maryfield - by hosting joint functions - or reaching out to Protestant/Unionist sections of opinion, the Protestant Churches, the Cadogan Group, even the Jigsaw Group etc) there may be little further that we can do.

4. And the primary reason why that is so has been brought out most clearly in my present exchanges with Mr Donoghue. While it is in our interest to explain and convince people of the fact that the Anglo-Irish Secretariat carries out what I hope are a number of modest, but nevertheless useful functions, and that the Anglo-Irish Agreement itself is something less than the Anglo-Eire diktat of legend, it is no less in the Irish interest to keep our activities veiled in mystery. The fact that Brian Feeney, one of Mr Donoghue's regular contacts in the Nationalist community, is rebutting Mr Roy Bradford's at times wholly unrealistic accusations of excessive and improper Irish influence by claiming that the Irish side has virtually no influence at all, has, as the scriptwriters of "the Pete and Dave Show" realise, worried Mr Donoghue at least as much as Unionist ranting!

5. So have Dr Mowlam's remarks, whether reported by Mr McCartan or over her own signature in the Independent. What has surprised me in this context is the lack of enthusiasm Mr Donoghue has evinced

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for Dr Mowlam generally. The extent that his views are representative of at least DFA thinking - and they tend to be - he does not like the lady. She is, for instance, "flaky". Neither she nor her Party is seen as pro-Nationalist. The fact that for Labour "the status quo is not an option" is worthless, in Mr Donoghue's book, because whatever happens in Northern Ireland, there is going to be some change anyway. On the other hand throwing light on the activities of Maryfield is perceived as a real threat. What is surprising is the degree to which Mr Donoghue volunteered these rather critical views; drawn my attention to the articles in question; and generally shaken his head even though I try to avoid any discussion with Mr Donoghue of post-election outcomes.

6. Against this background, persuading the Irish say, to admit a mutually acceptable journalist to Maryfield, or even do a short radio or television feature on our work - all ideas I have floated before him, without commitment - will not be easy. But, some of the real issues are out for inspection, and, even if Dr Mowlam never sets foot in Northern Ireland again, she has at least helped concentrate Irish minds on issues which I believe will be of continuing importance irrespective of what happens at our General Election.

7. "Pete and Dave" say it all more succinctly.

[Signed]

P N BELL

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