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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

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Counsellors A.L. Fee
Return original
to Mr. Ellis

Dear Assistant Secretary

In the course of a conversation yesterday with Mr. Graham Angel, Under-Secretary in the Northern Ireland Office, the following points emerged:

Maze Debate

Angel said that those who could have made trouble, particularly Enoch Powell, had made indifferent speeches so that the Government had relatively little difficulty defending itself. The allegation made by Labour's Northern Ireland spokesman, Peter Archer, that there had been no Ministerial visit to the Maze from June 1981 until June 1983 was untrue: Lord Gowrie had visited the Maze twice during that period. This information had been passed to Nicholas Scott but he had not made use of it in his reply to the debate nor had it been made public since. Angel commented that things would have been more difficult for Gowrie if, like Concannon when he was Minister, he had been visiting the Maze every week.

Parliamentary Tier

I asked Angel about the proposal which emerged during the recent IPU visit for flexible exchanges at regular intervals between the Dail and the Commons. Angel said that one of the problems was that many MPs had little knowledge of or interest in Anglo-Irish relations. More frequent meetings of the IPU type would create the basis for a parliamentary tier.

Forum

I described in broad general terms the shape the Forum report appeared to be taking, stressing that everything was tentative until final decisions were taken. In response Angel brought up, as others have done in recent conversations here, the attitude of the Unionists. His general line was to stress not the Unionist/Loyalist commitment to the Union but that tradition's non-acceptance of a United Ireland in any form. He saw the fundamental difficulty as being the refusal of the Unionists to take any step down the road so long as the ultimate objective or destination was Irish unity. If, however, the Unionists could be re-assured that "in the foreseeable future" (using Mr. Prior's phrase) they had no reason for apprehension on that score then the British Government would be prepared to over-ride the Unionist veto on political progress within Northern Ireland. Adverting to joint authority, Angel said the question was whether it would presuppose acceptance of the constitutional status quo. He asked whether the principles section of the Forum Report would have anything to say about majority rule and consent in Northern Ireland.

I mentioned that Mr. Prior had indicated some openness to the idea of the Forum remaining in being after its report had been issued. Angel said that his understanding of Mr. Prior's thinking was that if the option were a report which would take a strong nationalist line Mr. Prior would prefer a more indeterminate report even if this meant keeping the Forum in being.

As to any new structures or arrangements Angel said that he doubted if any arrangements of a purely security nature would actually help the SDLP. They were not at all clear as to what John Hume had in mind in this area. He said that the British side wondered whether the Minister for Justice was briefed about the new ideas that were being mooted: this question mark arose in their minds because of some of the responses which the Minister had given during his meeting with Mr. Prior.

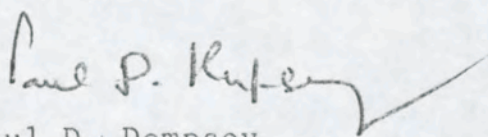
I tried to draw Angel out on how the British saw the post-Forum period without much success. His only comment was to say that while one side in the Anglo-Irish dialogue could not prevent the other side from raising issues he could not say how the Prime Minister would respond. In substantive terms and speaking hypothetically any new development would probably require legislation on the British side. This in turn would require the support of the Tory back benches and the acquiescence of the Unionists.

Angel said that David Goodall has put together some interesting ideas in the MEMU area from consultation with Whitehall Departments.

Merlyn Rees

Angel said that Merlyn Rees is working on his memoirs and that he has seen some chapters. Many of the personalities involved in Mr. Rees's time are still on the scene and Rees' memoirs would not be helpful. One of the points Rees would be making was that the truce was not the result of an agreement between the British Government and the IRA. Rees cites various contacts with the IRA in which it was made clear that no contract or agreement was involved. This whole matter was best left in the shade and reopening it would not be helpful.

Yours sincerely


Paul D. Dempsey

Mr. Michael Lillis
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs.