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CONFIDENTIAL

31 October, 1990

Mr Dermot Gallagher,
Assistant Secretary,
Anglo Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs,
Dublin 2.

Dear Assistant Secretary,

Dinner with Mr Joe Pilling

I had dinner with Mr. Joe Pilling the new Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs at Stormont last evening; no one else was present.

Mr. Pilling was among the first group of British Civil Servants who arrived in Northern Ireland in the early 1970's and he has been back on one occasion since then, in the late 1970's, when he served as Private Secretary to Roy Mason. His career in the interim has been in the Home Office where most recently he was Director General of the Prison Service.

Mr. Pilling spoke first of the difficulty of following in the steps of Mr. Ian Burns. Indeed, he said at one stage that he had himself transgressed advice which he gave to young civil servants, to wit, choose your own predecessor!

His easy manner and "I am still learning" approach contrasts with Mr Burns. He did remark, however, that the Prime Minister herself made all appointments at Grade 1 (Permanent Under Secretary) and Grade 2 (Deputy Under Secretary) level and had by now created a senior civil service in her own image. She liked fully committed achievers; in one case, that of a Mr. Wilding who had served as Secretary to the Fulton Committee On the Civil Service, the man had been cast into outer darkness because he was known to express the view that no civil servant should give more than 98% to his job in the interests of his psychological health, because a new government might require him to reverse engines!

We can, I think take it that Mr Pilling's quiet, laid-back persona conceals no less intelligence and determination than Mr Burns.

Prospects for the Initiative

Mr. Pilling pointed out that last Thursday's discussion was his first exposure to the political talks and he said he was too new to be able to offer much comment. He quizzed me closely, however, on our views. The one point to note is his feeling that the timing of his arrival is particularly difficult and that the prospects for the initiative are now very poor. He thought that in the current atmosphere Mr. Brooke cannot continue much longer and, indeed, should not do so in the interest of his own reputation.

Like Sir John Blelloch, he felt that progress had been made in the past year but offered the view that the situation had looked more promising in 1973 than it did now. He asked for views on the Agreement, presenting himself as an agnostic at this stage on its value and achievements. He said that personally, he had found it depressing last week to find himself scattering a "peppercot of adjectives" on Mr. Brooke's statement following the explosions at Newry and Derry. Mr. Pilling seems to have absorbed the view of the security forces that the IRA has lost none of its capacity to deal death over the last twenty years and is now more effective than ever.

In response to the continuous British pressure here to get us to accommodate and trust ourselves to Mr Brooke's judgement of the Unionists in regard to North/South talks, I have been querying the British refusal even to attempt to argue the merits of our position - which Mr Brooke and his officials say they understand intellectually (but describe as impractical) - with the Unionists and suggesting that the NIO's appreciation of the respective positions, fears and hopes of Nationalists and Unionists has become skewed heavily in favour of the latter since last May when Mr Brooke moved away from the document of 19 April and agreed a quite different line with the Unionists leaders. I have also been querying Mr Brooke's suggestions of recriminations and damage to the Agreement if the initiative does not move forward.

I recalled for Mr Pilling Mr. Brooke's letter to the Minister in August in which he argued that there would be greater damage to the Agreement if talks did not get off the ground than if they did and failed later on substantive issues, pointing out that Mr. Brooke seemed to feel that damage would be inflicted on the Agreement in any event if the initiative was not a complete success. I noted that Mr. Brooke had made the same point across the table last Thursday. Early in the year, however, when Mr. Brooke had been trying to persuade us to give our support, the British side had stressed repeatedly that the Agreement could not be damaged and would indeed be strengthened by the appearance of the two Governments seeking to find a better alternative acceptable to all parties. At that time, Mr. Brooke had spoken of "camping on the race course" or "pausing" and consolidating progress, if a breakthrough could not be achieved; and here I recalled the Minister's proposal for a "pause" in his letter to Mr Brooke immediately prior to the Commons statement of 5 July.

Mr. Brooke's line since August had been to dwell on the suggestion that damage could be caused to the Agreement and he had moved away from talk of pausing and consolidating progress made. We felt strongly that if we could not move forward at this point, the two Governments should commit themselves to ensuring that their relations and the Agreement did not suffer.

Interestingly, Mr. Pilling agreed that there had been a reverse in Mr. Brooke's view. He even suggested that Mr. Brooke's consciousness of his inconsistency made him play down the real pessimism which he now felt. The full extent of his feeling might not have got through to our Minister.

Attitude to the SDLP

At one point, Mr. Pilling recalled a dislike which Roy Mason had taken to the SDLP, in particular to Gerry Fitt and Paddy Devlin, in the late 1970's. In Mr. Pilling's view, Mason had come to have a "problem with Nationalists" because of his puritanical reaction to what he regarded as indiscipline, over-fondness of a jar, and earthy language on the Nationalist side. He made it clear that unfortunately Mason's personal reaction had become a factor in the NIO's dealings with Nationalists. I took the opportunity to say that I had detected that Mr Brooke had developed a personal preference for dealing with the Unionist leaders and pointed out that several members of the NIO had noted to me how disciplined, punctual, prepared, clear in their objectives, the Unionist leaders were, suggesting, although not explicitly, that the same could not be said of the SDLP. I had noticed how quickly John Chilcot had come to express the same view. As in the case of Mason, there might be a danger of allowing tastes and preferences to have undue influence on political relations and on strategy. Mr Pilling was interested by the point, adding the comment that he had been struck last Thursday at "how very English" Mr Brooke must seem to our Ministers.

Britain's Prisons

Mr Pilling was quite forthcoming in discussion about the job he has just come from in the Home Office. The following are a few points of interest:

Britain's prison population has fallen sharply from 51,000 to 46,000 in the past three years. There have been three similar dips since the war but the calculation is that prison population will climb again notwithstanding hints to judges to minimise the handing down of custodial sentences. It is aimed to have new prisons coming on stream to cater for 60,000 prisoners before the end of the 1990s.

I asked about the Home Office policy on categorisation and decategorisation. Mr. Pilling said frankly that categorisation was decided essentially on the basis of the anticipated political fall-out from escape rather than the real risk; and there were inconsistencies. For example, one of the problems was that young tearaways in the football hooligan class were placed in Category "C" prisons which were thinly staffed and relatively open and

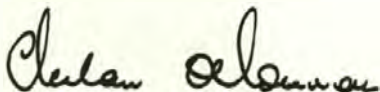
insecure. It would not be of serious political consequence if such prisoners escaped, yet they had a taste for riot and were very difficult to handle in the "C" Prison category.

In response to my question, he said that decategorisation of the Birmingham Six would have been decided (a) because there was less chance of public uproar if the prisoners escaped, (b) because they were ~~are~~ judged highly unlikely to attempt escape because of their age and the incentive of possible reversal of their convictions and (c) because of a general feeling that the "course of history is on their side".

I asked about the Strangeways prison riot earlier this year. Mr. Pilling said that this period was the most uncomfortable of his career. Ministers had lost all confidence in the prison service and were themselves at sea, raging impotently at the continuous nightly coverage on BBC and ITV. He was critical of the Strangeways Governor Brian O'Friel, who adopted a high and emotional profile at the time. Mr Pillings's testament to his successor in charge of the Prison Service was a Napoleonic "let him be lucky in his prison governors!"

Mr. Pilling does not seem to hold the Home Secretary, Mr. Waddington, in high esteem. In contrast, he feels that Mr. Hurd, despite the fact that he was not instinctively attuned to prison issues and had no managerial experience, came to establish an impressive command of his prison brief.

Yours sincerely,



Declan O'Donovan
Joint Secretary