

S E C R E T and PERSONAL

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FROM: R J ALSTON
US(POL)

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N.I.O. LONDON

BJ

cc 2/9
FS/PUS (L&B) - B
Mr Ledlie - B
Mr Deverell/Mr Petch - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr McNeill/Mr Marsh - B
Mr Cooke - B

MR THOMAS - B [1]

POLITICAL MOVEMENT AND THE PROVISIONALS

PUS has indicated that we should look again at our position on political movement after the holidays (and has I believe agreed this with the Secretary of State). I am sure this is right. Our own immediate objective remains a further round in the political development process. Further serious initiatives by the Provisionals themselves seem relatively unlikely in the short term, though the debate about political and military means continues and we should be ready to respond eg to another Christmas ceasefire. Against that we may conclude fairly swiftly that political development cannot be taken much further this side of an election. An end to violence is a prize we should constantly strive for. Most concretely we continue to see indicators that both the Taoiseach and John Hume continue to toy with their alternative agenda, which is in effect one for what we describe as political movement ie an end to violence and a process of re-integrating the Republican tradition into constitutional politics.

2. We continue to hear echoes of views within the Provisional movement that a switch to political means might more successfully further their objectives than continuing violence. There is no reason to believe that people like Adams and McGuinness have abandoned this as a medium term view. There has however been little sign of active discussion or debate since the Ard Fheis in February,

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and the prospective mediators have clearly been getting as little to work with on the Provisional side as on ours. Adams made a publicised appeal for open ended talks to the Prime Minister, the Irish Government and others on 21 August (on which Mr McNeill will be submitting advice) but, whilst this was a signal of continuing interest, it was weak in content and its timing seems to have owed most to electoral concerns and pressure on Sinn Fein as a result of increasing levels of IRA activity. (Mid-August, with virtually every addressee on holiday, is not the time to have chosen for a major initiative). The IRA may not be making any major breakthroughs, but its ability to sustain violence shows no sign of reducing. There is no immediate source of time pressure (other than for Adams himself to hold his Parliamentary seat). We should not exclude a further initiative if the Provisional leadership judged the time to be right. They seem more likely to be responsive than to be taking initiatives in the next few months, though a Christmas initiative must be a distinct possibility.

3. The balance of advantage for us also looks relatively unchanged since the late winter. Sinn Fein positions have showed some signs of evolution eg in dropping a commitment to withdrawal by HMG as a pre-condition, and a hint of readiness to adopt the principle of unity by consent. But there has been no sign of readiness to renounce violence in return for a process of which Irish unity is not the overt goal. At the more practical level we remain very sceptical as to whether a complete cessation of violence could or would be delivered. Perhaps decisively at present, a renunciation of violence is probably unachievable without our entering into direct contact with the Provisional movement which could risk wrecking the whole political development initiative.

4. We may nonetheless find ourselves coming under pressure from the Taoiseach and of John Hume. The Taoiseach has a finite period to

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the end of his political career and the prospect of waiting until things settle after a British Election cannot be attractive. He remains sceptical about the prospects for political development in any timeframe relevant to him personally. He remains wedded to the goal of Irish unity and to the New Ireland Forum agenda. There was a measure of wishful thinking in his interpretation of his June meeting with the Prime Minister and it is as yet too soon to see whether Sir R Butler's setting of the record straight with Dermot Nally had its effect. Although there is a measure of accord on a sequence of steps - a joint declaration, Provisional acceptance of the principal of consent, an end to violence, and a nationalist forum - between the Taoiseach and John Hume, there are also significant differences. John Hume is prepared to play the game over a longer period. He is also readier to muffle the ultimate aspiration to unity considerably more in order to make the first steps possible. Given his own ambivalence about devolution he may however take some convincing that an early resumption of political talks is a more profitable option than pursuit of his alternative agenda.

(b) a re-affirmation of our belief that real progress can only
5. If the analysis above is broadly agreed, some relatively straightforward conclusions follow:

- (a) we should continue to take no specific steps, directly or indirectly, to do any kind of deal with the Provisionals, and should offer no new public signals (my initial outline for the Secretary of State's Enniskillen speech avoids seeking to do this);
- (b) we should at the same time continue to tailor our public comments in such a way as to strengthen the arguments within the Provisional movement in favour of greater emphasis on the political option (a significant opportunity to do this will be the Secretary of State's Enniskillen speech);

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7. (c) we should continue (eg in Mr Blatherwick's initial calls in Dublin) to prepare for the Autumn Summit in a way which deters the Taoiseach from pursuing ideas which could destroy the political development process.

6. Rather more care may be needed to work out our response to the softer version of the thesis which John Hume may be tempted to advance during the Autumn, and which he may seek to advocate with the Taoiseach as well as with us. Its impact, if developed prematurely, is as damaging potentially to the political development process as to the Taoiseach's, but it avoids the obvious excesses of assuming early signals about British withdrawal or a total focus of the New Ireland Forum agenda. If John Hume does show signs of developing this line of argument, one set of possible responses could be on the following lines:

(a) a re-statement of the principles of our position on the constitutional situation;

(b) a re-affirmation of our belief that real progress can only be achieved through means which lead, however slowly, to reconciliation both between the communities in Northern Ireland and between Unionists and Dublin;

(c) scepticism as to whether there is really a chance of early renunciation of violence by the Provisional movement without direct talks with them, or on terms which (whether or not the British Government was itself a party to the process) would not be seen as a victory for the Provisionals, either of which would gravely set back any chance of political progress;

(d) doubt as to whether there can be any real certainty that the Provisional movement itself is yet at stage where the men of violence can be delivered in support of a more political approach on any other terms.

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7. Looking further ahead it may be right to set work in hand soon on:

(a) handling a Christmas ceasefire, particularly if this were to be for a longer period than last year or, less likely, open ended, and whether this could lead to a sequence of action - without direct contact initially - to reduce violence;

(b) other possible ways of initiating a process of de-escalation by tacit but recognised steps on each side (an idea which surfaced in Derry with Mr Lampen last year and may be of some appeal of McGuinness as a way of breaking out of the current impasse).

8. I am minuting separately about the possible content of an Enniskillen speech. If a broader review of the political movement scene can be left until I return from leave I shall naturally be happy to participate. If PUS and you judge that it would be prudent to take this forward sooner, I hope this minute may be a useful contribution to setting the ball rolling.

[signed RJA]

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