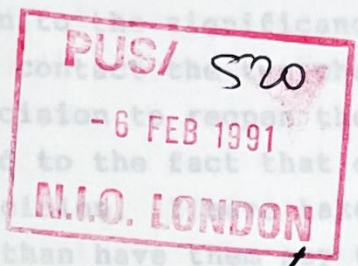
PAB/6873/DGMcN/RG

FROM: D G McNEILL, PAB
DATE: 4 FEBRUARY 1991

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cc PS/PUS (B&L) [3&4]
Mr Pilling [5]
Mr Deverell [6]
Mr Ledlie [7]
Mr Alston [8]
File [9]

PS/Secretary of State (B&L) [1&2]

1. The request from Archbishop Daly and Archbishop Eames, to be accompanied by Bishop Poyntz and the two Maze Chaplains, to meet the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister refers.

2. The purpose of the meeting is to enable those people to talk directly to the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister about the dialogue which the chaplains have been having with people who state themselves to be members of the PAC of PIRA.

3. As you know there has been regular contact between the two chaplains and me over the last few months and the Secretary of State and PUS and I have had conversations with both Archbishops on these issues.

4. The contacts so far with these churchmen has been largely in a listening mode with us restating and clarifying the position that we cannot negotiate with a non-elected violent organisation such as PIRA and that we can only deal with Sinn Fein when violence ends - the latter concept not being defined in concrete terms. However the two clergymen believe, and their Bishops seem to support them, that the PAC would be prepared to order a cessation of violence if we were to meet them even if that contact was not long lasting and even if subsequent substantive dialogue continued only with Sinn Fein.

5. Over the recent weeks, without at any stage allowing them to think that we would be prepared to talk to the PAC, I have taken pains to assure the chaplains that we were giving serious consideration to the significance of what they had been told and indeed I did contact the two chaplains at Christmas to tell them about the decision to reopen the PVCPs during the Christmas ceasefire and to the fact that our decision resulted from the ceasefire decision. I have taken this line to keep the chaplains on hold rather than have them say to their contacts that we were not interested in the proposition which they were drawing to our attention. I did this since we did not want confusing messages going to the Provisional movement at a time when they seemed to be trying to come in from the cold.

6. However, over the last few weeks it has become increasingly clear that the chaplains and to some extent their bishops are becoming frustrated at what they see as our prevaricating tactics. They and their bishops have a genuine dilemma. They think that they are on to something - the chaplains more so than the bishops perhaps; they feel a moral obligation to pass this on to those with responsibility - that is us - and to encourage us to grasp the nettle and so enable them to stand down; but we do not give them a clear answer.

7. The request for a meeting springs from that sense of frustration.

8. I met the chaplains on 1/2/91 at my request to learn about the detailed circumstances surrounding the request for the meeting. They informed me that they had discussed the whole issue with the three bishops on 25 January 1991. All five expressed dissatisfaction at the lack of action as they saw it. It was then suggested by Bishop Poyntz that the two Archbishops should ask to meet the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister (the latter on their assumption that Mrs Thatcher had been fully briefed on the issue but that Mr Major may not be). This suggestion was further

developed by Archbishop Eames who said that any meeting should not be confined to the two Archbishops but should involve all five. This was accepted by those present. The chaplains said that they were surprised at the suggestion for the meeting but did not and do not object to it. However they emphasised that the request was not initiated by them.

9. The chaplains told me that the Archbishops consider that the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister should agree to meet them given that they are the leaders of the two main churches here and that within reason the Archbishops should be able to be accompanied by those whom they wish. However, they thought that the Archbishops would not refuse to meet if we said that the chaplains should not be present.

10. There are therefore two main issues for consideration.

11. Firstly, should any minister see a delegation which includes the two chaplains? There is no doubt that these two men are responsible, dedicated and worthy churchmen. However they have been in direct contact with people who say they are members of the PAC of PIRA. To agree to meet them in that knowledge would create an inevitable risk of misunderstanding and hostile misinterpretation if some or all of the facts came to light at a later statge. Their presence could also make an open exchange between the others present much more difficult. Therefore, the official advice is that any meeting should be with the bishops alone.

12. The second issue is whether the Prime Minister should be asked to see them. The two Archbishops clearly want to see the Prime Minister and they could regard it as discourteous and dismissive if we were to turn them down. The letter is of course addressed to the Secretary of State and so far as I am aware not copied to No.10. However I do not think that we should read into that any indication that that represented any dilution of their desire to meet the Prime Minister as well as the Secretary of State. Of course they realise

that the Prime Minister is heavily committed on the Gulf front - they acknowledge that on their letter. However, they do regard the issue with which they are faced as of major significance and one which should be brought to the attention of those at the highest levels in Government.

13. It is a finely balanced decision. On the one hand the Secretary of State is perfectly capable of meeting the two Archbishops and of assuring them that he will draw their concerns to the attention of the Prime Minister. Indeed I am sure that the two Archbishops would agree to meet the Secretary of State even if they were disappointed at not meeting the Prime Minister. On the other hand the two men are major figures in their own right in Northern Ireland. They have not asked for this meeting lightly. And since they do regard this as an issue which is of momentous significance for Northern Ireland it would help us reassure them that we are taking the matter seriously if we were to give them the opportunity of raising the matter with the Prime Minister. So I do not think we should rule out the possibility of a meeting.

14. However, there may not be an early opportunity for them to meet the Prime Minister and in any event it would be more appropriate for the Secretary of State to meet them first and then, if he thinks it would be helpful, to tell them that he will ask the Prime Minister to meet them.

15. I recommend therefore that the Secretary of State should invite the two Archbishops to meet him in the first instance though he should tell the two Archbishops that it may well be possible for him to arrange for them to meet the Prime Minister in the not too distant future. If he is content with this I can make the arrangements for that meeting; that will give me the chance to explain the reason for the Secretary of State wishing to meet them and only them first.

16. A draft reply on these lines is attached.

17. The Prime Minister has not yet been told of the request for the meeting. The Secretary of State may find an opportunity to mention this to him when they meet soon so that he is aware of it. Alternatively, if the Secretary of State wishes to inform the Prime Minister more fully a full submission on the issue can be prepared.

(SIGNED)

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