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cc TAOISEACH
 Minister
 Secretary
 Mr. Nally
 A-I SECTION
 Mr. Hillis

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11 April 1986

Some views from Sir Geoffrey Howe and from Lord Whitelaw, 9 April 1986

Dear Assistant Secretary

I had the opportunity at the Lord Mayor's Easter Banquet on Wednesday, 9 April for a brief exchange with the Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe and a rather longer discussion with Lord Whitelaw, the Lord President of the Council, about the current situation.

Sir Geoffrey Howe

He had been the main guest speaker of the evening - he spoke at some length about the problem of food surpluses and Government subsidy for food production in America, Europe and Japan. My exchange with him was brief and we were interrupted very quickly by another guest who wanted to talk to him about his speech.

Howe is quite worried about the present situation in Northern Ireland. I said that both Governments have no option but to stand by the Agreement. Howe replied "yes - but I hope that that will soon begin to pay dividends". I was left with the impression that a notably placid man has become rather more anxious than I would have expected.

Lord Whitelaw

I had a rather more substantial chat with Whitelaw (and I had the impression that he wanted to talk to me as he broke away from someone else to do so). He too is obviously worried about the present situation - particularly, he said, about the continuing and sustained attacks on the RUC. He has been casting around to see what could be done while standing firm on the Agreement but so far, he said, he has been unable to come up with any answer.

He repeated more than once during our conversation that we must stand firm on the Agreement. There can be absolutely no question of backing down before the Unionist show of force - if this were done it would never be possible to do anything again. He recalled the experience of 1974 (the Labour backdown in face of the Ulster Workers Strike) and said he had always been very bitter about it as it brought down what had been the best effort to resolve the problem.

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Whitelaw believes that some of the Unionist leadership are looking now for a way off the hook; and "some people" are now inclined to say that the Taoiseach should offer it by expressing publicly his willingness to suspend the Agreement for a time. But this is not possible - and the Taoiseach simply could not do it. To talk publicly of suspending or changing the Agreement would be to "blow it away"; and it would never be possible to get it together again. One could of course hold off for a time on having a meeting of the Conference. The difficulty about that however would be that one could not say anything in public about it or things would begin to unravel; and, on the other hand, unless it were public it would not serve to get Unionists off the hook. So, he wondered again, - "what can we do"?

I replied that we too feel that both Governments must stand absolutely firm on the Agreement and yet hope to find a way to draw Unionist politicians into discussion and get them to engage in talks with other parties within Northern Ireland on devolution. If there were evidence of serious intent then perhaps a formula not involving a suspension or abrogation of the Agreement could be found. (I was echoing in a general way the message which I had conveyed on 7 April to Armstrong about the Taoiseach's response to the approach through Archbishop Eames. I thought it better however not to mention it explicitly on this occasion - although it is likely that Whitelaw knows about it already).

I said that there must be some question however whether it would be possible to get a serious political response from the Unionist leadership at the present time and I asked him if he thought, as some do, that real political progress could come only at the end of the marching season? Somewhat to my surprise he said he did not attach too much importance either way to the marching season - if there were something that could be done. But he still did not know what. He said he thought it important that we should keep in touch.

Comment

I am not quite sure what to make of some of Whitelaw's comments. For the most part his position is clear enough; he is worried about the RUC - though he hopes they will stand up to the present campaign against them; he has a firm conviction that the Unionists cannot be allowed to win the present confrontation or be given any reason to think that the Agreement will be changed or suspended; and, coupled with this, he is casting around in a worried way for what might be done to help the Unionist leadership get off the hook. He has however no very clear idea as to what the answer might be.

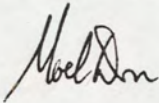
Having said all this however, I am inclined to wonder a bit about Whitelaw's offhand comment that "some people" are saying that the Taoiseach could offer to suspend the Agreement. Could he himself be one of them? I think he proceeds at times sideways and by indirection; and it is often wise to consider whether he may actually be trying to float an idea which it appears he has mentioned only in order to knock it down.

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Since I spoke with him on Wednesday night, there has been the story in Thursday's Times "Hint of Ulster Concession by Thatcher" which you will have seen and which says at one point "It is understood that Lord Whitelaw . . . has doubts about the Anglo-Irish Agreement". What is "understood" in par 3 of such a story has usually come from somewhere very close to the mouth of the particular horse in question - although Bevins, the author of the piece, is not by any means a heavyweight political journalist and the main point of his story has since been denied.

My own view is that Whitelaw does indeed "have doubts" about the Agreement as he always had but they are the doubts of someone who came to accept it as the best available option - thought he still thinks it second best to the lost opportunity of Sunningdale. Whitelaw probably retains his doubts and may even have let them show in talking with Bevins or Bell. But he more than most, remembering 1974, is sensible of the dangers of backing down now in face of Loyalist threats. He cannot yet see any way out which would not involve these dangers; and he will counsel standing firm unless and until he does.

Yours sincerely



Noel Dorr
Ambassador

Mr Eamon O Tuathail
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin 2