



# An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

17 Grosvenor Place  
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5 March 1987

Dear Assistant Secretary

Our policy of persuasion at Westminster1. Background

In 1983 the Irish Government decided that it had to address the Northern Ireland problem in a radical new way. This involved a concerted effort, at Government level, to persuade Mrs Thatcher and her Government to accept the Irish analysis of the problem (in particular the implications of continued alienation within the minority community in the North), and to work toward an agreed common policy to address it in a definitive way.

Although the outcome of that process could not be confidently forecast at that time, it was clear that if it were successful, and if the British Government decided to move in a major way, the formal agreement of Parliament would be required and robust support for it within Parliament would be essential.

Irish diplomatic efforts vis-a-vis politicians at Westminster prior to 1983 were in the main general and by and large confined to "Ireland's friends", mostly in the Labour Party. The range of these contacts broadened or contracted pretty well as a direct result of the personal initiative put into cultivating them by successive political and press officers at the Embassy. Until 1983 there was little specific direction from successive Irish Governments or from the Department in this regard.

In 1983, however, the Government decided that a major ancillary arm of its policy vis-a-vis the British Government would be a systematic operation on British political figures at Westminster; to brief them on the Northern Ireland problem from Dublin's perspective; to press home to them the need for radical remedial action; to get them to give encouragement to the Government - on the floor of the House and otherwise - to press ahead with the then embryonic negotiation process; and to help to give a resounding - historic, even - decision if and when the matter ever came before Parliament in a vote.

The Ambassador and the Political Counsellor at the Embassy were, therefore, specifically instructed to launch a wide-ranging

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campaign of persuasion at Westminster with particular, but not at all exclusive, emphasis on the Conservative Government and Party (as it was - correctly - believed that we would be dealing with them in Government for quite some time). This campaign was to be comprehensive, but if at all possible it was to extend too into the hard right wing of the Party where opposition to the process in hand would surely be most vehement.

At that time the overall and priority target was of course the vote in the House of Commons if and when the policy successfully delivered that result, and at that time - naturally enough - little thought was given to a policy vis-a-vis Westminster which might or should flow from that target point.

In the event, the policy of persuasion was pursued vigorously, and included many figures on the right wing of the Tory backbenches. There is no doubt that when Mrs Thatcher, as it were, "turned on" in the negotiations and it seemed that the Agreement might itself be "on", this had a galvanising effect on her Party. However, it may be said that our efforts too helped to swing support for the policy around behind the Prime Minister (particularly, perhaps, through efforts to persuade right wingers to support it, or at least to remain neutral and abstain). The debate on the Agreement in the Commons was a two-day one, on 26/27 November, 1985, and this reflected to a considerable extent the new-found knowledge on the part of many M.P.s on the matter. Those Members, called by John Hume "the Embassy A-Team", were particularly helpful and contributed in a major way toward demolishing anti-Agreement arguments on the floor of the House from unreconciled right wingers and the Unionists themselves. John Butterfill, M.P., for example, used "blacks" of the Dail debate a few days previously to destroy in the Commons debate harsh allegations that the Irish Dail was misinterpreting or grossly over-representing the implications of the Agreement. [As these contacts were progressively developed, it was noticeable too that the attendance and quality of debate on Northern Ireland matters in the Commons, particularly in Northern Ireland Questions each month, improved considerably.]

The vote on the Agreement was 473 for to 47 against (including all the Unionists). This was, by any standard, an historic decision by Parliament and, inter alia, it greatly strengthened the Prime Minister's hand when the loyalist reaction to the Agreement developed and began to assume the proportions that we are now familiar with.

2. The present situation

The Unionist and loyalist reaction to the Agreement was more general, less violent and more sustained than the terms of the Agreement (with its guarantee) might have led the two Governments to expect. The Unionist resignations and subsequent by-elections, their boycott of Westminster, the Ian Gow resignation, the activities of the "Friends of the Union" organisation, media activity of a vociferous kind by pro-Unionist, anti-Agreement journalists (whose material has become increasingly unsavoury as their case has met ever-increasing firmness from the British Government) have all

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had some debilitating effect on some of our clients at Westminster whose continued support for the Agreement is clearly needed.

More significantly, trickles of discontent from British Government sources about progress under the Agreement, in the area of security co-operation most particularly, have infected many erstwhile supporters of the Government on the backbenches. It cannot be over-stressed that, despite vigorous efforts to keep M.P.s informed and steady on the Agreement, Ireland is not a burning issue for most of them; there are 650 of them, and many - perhaps most - of them agreed to support the Agreement on the basis that it would somehow be a panacea and make the Northern Ireland problem "go away", that the problem would not re-assert itself, unresolved, upon them. This of course reflects the widespread simplicity of the majority of British politicians (and the British public as a whole) as regards the entangled problem of Anglo-Irish relations but it is a fact that we have had to live with and try to deal with.

So far only 6 Tories have over the past 15 months formally turned against the Agreement and joined the 21 Tory M.P.s who voted against it. This took the form of signatures attached to a motion against the Queen's Speech last Autumn. It included two big fish, Jonathan Aitken and Nicholas Soames. However, behind this there is now a considerable and growing number of M.P.s who are distinctly shaky on the Agreement and who feel that it was a mistake and that it has not worked. We are giving a lot of attention to them in the form of briefings about the success of the Agreement in weaning the minority population away from Sinn Fein, security co-operation and so on; stressing the need for time in the complex and difficult task of the Conference; and pointing to the need to show continued firmness of purpose to the Unionists for their own good. About 50 M.P.s are at present targetted for this purpose.

There is not yet a hardening in this reaction to present difficulties to the point where M.P.s are ready to organise and exert formal pressure on the Government to re-think the policy, but there is no doubt that they are moving slowly in that direction. Any hint of infirmity of purpose vis-a-vis the Agreement from either the British Government or the Irish Government would surely accelerate this drift. Many M.P.s, sounded lightly about their inner feelings, confirm this. They generally stress that they would not in present circumstances, where the two Governments are firm and unshakable, pass over the threshold and consider direct and concerted action, but they are disheartened and it takes all our efforts to dry them up and assure them that the present policy is all to the good and will produce in time consistent evidence of success. The single area in which they are most doubtful is that of security co-operation and concrete progress and results in that area, where it can be demonstrated as flowing from the Agreement and our commitment to it, is our best weapon to combat this drift.

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3. The foreseeable future

We now have a wide range of political contacts at Westminster where Embassy officers are an accepted feature of the daily round. It was of course we who, during the long process of building relations at Westminster, stressed inter alia the special relationship point, one which is by and large now widely accepted, even by our "enemies" at Westminster. We are pretty well expected to be around and to inhabit their daily landscape. Many M.P.s who have not been seen for some little time think it quite natural to ring up and suggest a drink or a meal in order to get a further up-date on Anglo-Irish relations from the Dublin perspective.

Even if we did not have hard and pressing reasons (as, it is suggested below, we have) for maintaining close contact with politicians at Westminster, it seems self-evident that any "disengagement" from Westminster would be noticed pretty quickly and would lead to questions about our overall policy. There is no doubt at all that the Unionists' friends at Westminster, who are highly aware of our activity and who resent it, would certainly seize the opportunity to impugn the Irish Government's commitment to an ongoing close working relationship with our wide range of Ministerial and backbench contacts.

It is suggested, therefore, that as a matter of principle, and leaving aside for the moment other reasons for doing so, we should continue in the medium term at least to stay very much "in play" vis-a-vis our many contacts. It is perhaps worth saying in passing that this does not of course involve the marshalling of great forces: the Political Counsellor does it, but does other things too; the Press and Information Officer has to a lesser but still significant extent a range of parliamentary Westminster contacts as well as a large number of lobby and political press contacts there; and the Ambassador has a very significant role both as host and, in response to invitations from various political committees, as a speaker on Anglo-Irish matters.

It is suggested that there are, however, pressing reasons for continued priority to be given to our Westminster policy.

- The game is by no means run on the Anglo-Irish Agreement. We should continue to work hard to allay the increasing doubts on the part of many M.P.s as outlined above. Apart from the direct benefit from this, it would help to keep pressure off Mrs Thatcher herself and her Ministers to re-consider in some way her commitment to the Agreement. Her eyes and ears in Parliament are the business leaders (John Wakeham, John Biffen, John Cope) and the Whips and they are of course ultra-sensitive to any ripples and waves of discontent among their parliamentary forces. There have in the past been acknowledgements at very high (and including the highest) political level here of our efforts to sway Conservative backbenchers to support the Government's policy. It seems clear that if there are detectable whiffs of dissatisfaction about the Agreement at Government level, then it is in our strong interest to prevent that spreading in the backbenches and to prevent it being seized upon and used by the anti-Agreement forces.

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- We should anticipate the day when the Unionists just might decide to return to Parliament and continue the anti-Agreement fight constitutionally on the floor of the House, in the Lobbies and tea-rooms. There is an extraordinary empathy at Westminster toward the underdog and although the Unionists are pretty well out of court at the moment, it is very probable that widespread efforts would be made to respond very positively to an effort on their part to return and play the game: we have been told this in no uncertain terms by both John Wakeham and John Cope, and they are in the best position to make a return by the Unionists warmly welcomed on the Government side of the House.
  
- We have heard of recent meetings at Westminster aimed at getting the anti-Agreement lobby onto a more sophisticated footing. If they manage this, or even half-manage it, they will surely find sympathetic ears among those M.P.s who are susceptible to our persuasion in very large part because we are at present the voices of reason from the other side of the Irish sea and the Unionists and loyalists have behaved pretty disgracefully. It is a fact that a cleaned-up, respectable and strictly constitutional anti-Agreement lobby would recover a significant number of M.P.s who despite our persuasion are unsteady about the Agreement. This could - surely would - in turn have some effect on the business managers, the Whips, the Prime Minister and the Government.

For the foregoing reasons it would seem that we have every interest in maintaining our range of contacts at Westminster and in asserting to them our conviction that the Anglo-Irish Agreement represents the best policy for the foreseeable future, that it "delivers", and will "deliver" more concrete benefits in due course.

It is suggested too that consideration should be given to enhancing the effect of our lobbying policy at Westminster by bringing small (4 or 5 Members at a time) groups of carefully selected M.P.s to Dublin for meetings there at political level. Such visits can be short and could very usefully take roughly the same form as we used for the visits last year by Andrew MacKay, M.P. (PPS to Tom King), Ian Gow, M.P. and the Labour Party delegation last December. The MacKay visit had direct positive results in that he immediately reported to Tom King in detail on the three-man courts issue (on which King has since formally taken our side although we do not of course know this officially). The Labour Party visit was successful, inter alia, in that Peter Archer agreed as a result of his discussions in Dublin to change Labour's policy on the same issue, and the delegation made a strong statement to the media before they left Dublin to the effect that a Labour Party in Government would not entertain the purchasing of Unionist support at Westminster at the price of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Ian Gow visit did not of course achieve "a Saint Paul" result: Gow is deeply entrenched in his views on the Agreement; but he said he greatly valued his exchanges in Dublin and it is self-evident that it is valuable to keep in touch with him and to assert our views and convictions regularly to him.

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Andrew MacKay, M.P. organises such visits by M.P.s to Northern Ireland and he and Tom King find them to be very valuable. MacKay and I co-ordinate pretty closely in drawing up lists of M.P.s who we believe need attention and exposure to our Governments' views and policies vis-a-vis Northern Ireland.

You will have seen from our reporting from London that many M.P.s here tend to round off our discussions by expressing interest in such visits to Dublin in order, basically, to run over the same ground but at political level there.

A basic target (taking into account cost and logistic factors) might be to invite up to about 24 M.P.s on a crossbench basis in each 12 month period. Thus we could aim at about 5 visits per year of about 5 M.P.s each. Our files on Westminster are now fairly refined and we are in a position to choose carefully so as to ensure that each M.P. invited is one who would benefit particularly from exposure to political level discussions in Dublin, and would very likely be of subsequent use to us in Westminster debates and in behind-the-scenes discussions of Northern Ireland policy at Westminster.

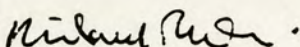
In the case of right wing Conservative backbenchers, such visits could go a very long way toward persuading them to accept our side of the argument, toward hopefully swinging them around behind the Agreement or, at least, toward neutralising them and keeping them out of the Unionist or pro-Unionist camp.

4. Conclusion

It is suggested, therefore, that consideration be given to:

1. Continuing our policy of persuasion at Westminster on a selective basis vis-a-vis our wide range of contacts there in order to counter spreading doubts there about the Agreement and as far as possible to keep Westminster dry and behind the Government on the Agreement;
2. inviting about 24 M.P.s, on a crossbench basis, annually on brief visits to Dublin for discussions at political level, this policy to include particularly (but not, of course, exclusively) right wing Conservative backbenchers who are otherwise most likely to lead the swing against the Agreement and the Government's policy on it.

Yours sincerely

  
Richard Ryan  
Charge d'Affaires a.i.

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