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17, GROSVENOR PLACE,
SW1X 7HR
Telephone: 01-235 2171
TELEX: 916104

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29 April 1988

Mr. R. O'Brien
Press Counsellor
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Dick

Lunch with John Cole, Political Correspondent, BBC

The following are the main points which emerged over lunch with Cole:

- As his report from Westminster on Mrs. Thatcher's Commons reply last Tuesday made clear, he believes that the continuing impasse over extradition lies behind the irritation demonstrated by the Prime Minister. The word around Westminster is that the talks between representatives of the two Attorneys General are not going well. The Irish Attorney General is reported to have rejected a reasonable offer made by Sir Patrick Mayhew and is "demanding too much". A senior law officer told Cole that "we despair of ever getting senior IRA men extradited from the Republic again". Cole believes that the killing of the two Army soldiers in West Belfast has made Mrs. Thatcher more belligerent on the subject of extradition with the Republic (as it is suspected that the primary culprits may have taken refuge in the South). I noted the arrests which have already taken place in West Belfast and wondered whether evidence existed to support this suspicion. Cole's only response was: "Where else would you expect them to go?"
- What Mrs. Thatcher was getting at in her Tuesday reply, therefore, was 'security co-operation' in the sense of extradition arrangements. As long as the extradition issue is not cleared up, she can be expected to exploit it in fending off criticism from the Taoiseach on other fronts.
- Cole has strong reservations about the Agreement, but more on practical than on ideological grounds. He believes that it cannot work because of the multiple and conflicting pressures to which the parties to it are subjected. It will, however, continue -

primarily because Mrs. Thatcher (as her response to the Taoiseach last week showed) finds it impossible to admit that any of her policies are wrong. The Agreement, as Cole sees it, is "a marriage which has its ups and downs - but there will be no divorce". Despite the strains of the past ten days, there will be another meeting of the Conference next week and another "nice communique" to reassure everyone that the Agreement is back on the rails again - "until the next crisis". In response, I challenged this defeatism by pointing to some of the Agreement's more notable successes over the past two-and-a-half years.

- While clearly well-disposed towards Sir Geoffrey Howe (who has told him privately on several occasions of his certainty that the Agreement will "work eventually"), Cole considers that the British Government is, on the whole, ignorant of political realities in Northern Ireland. He was particularly scathing about the London-based NIO civil servants. (In contrast, Ken Bloomfield is "the finest civil servant I have ever known" but, Cole claims, he was not consulted about the Agreement.)
- Cole is very pessimistic about the prospects for political movement in Northern Ireland. He would personally like to see a devolved government based on power-sharing but he sees no likelihood of the Unionists conceding this under present circumstances ("if ever"). Equally, it is highly unlikely that the SDLP would ever accept anything less.
- Cole firmly believes that the IRA can be defeated by military means (and he denounced Sir Anthony Glover for having taken the opposite view in a Panorama programme last February). I tackled him at length on this, insisting on the link between the perceived ability of politicians to redress grievances and the level of support for paramilitary violence at any given time. I underlined the folly of seeing the Northern Ireland problem solely as a security issue and pointed out that, despite the disappointing emphasis on this aspect in her reply last week, Mrs. Thatcher had both implicitly and explicitly endorsed our approach in signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Eventually, Cole accepted that certain reforms might indeed help to reduce nationalist support for paramilitary activities - but "it is going^{to be} a very long haul".

Yours sincerely

David Donoghue

David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer