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10 December 1996

Mr. Sean O hUiginn  
Second Secretary  
Anglo-Irish Division  
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Secretary,

**Visit to Dublin by the Leader of the Opposition, 12-13 December**

I offer a number of observations on Mr. Blair's visit.

**Background**

Blair previously visited Dublin on 4-5 September 1995. This month, the plan was to be in Dublin for the meeting of the Party of European Socialists on the evening of 12 December. However, having spoken with the Tánaiste in London on 7 November, Mr. Blair has decided to arrive in Dublin on the morning of 12 December for a bilateral visit. To do this, he has had to take the unusual step of opting out of Prime Minister's Questions on the Thursday afternoon.

**Party and programme**

Blair will be accompanied to Dublin by his Chief of Staff, Jonathan Powell, his Press Officer, Alastair Campbell, and his adviser on Ireland, Scotland and constitutional issues, Pat McFadden. All three are well known to the Embassy. Jonathan Powell was dealing with Ireland at the British Embassy in Washington when recruited by Blair. He is the brother of Sir Charles Powell, the former adviser to Mrs. Thatcher. It is generally held that Blair, as Prime Minister, would have a "presidential" style and that Powell would have a key role. Alastair Campbell, formerly of the Daily Mirror, is considered to be one of the most influential press officers at Westminster. Pat McFadden, a Glaswegian from a

Donegal family, has made the transition from John Smith's to Tony Blair's office.

Mo Mowlam and her adviser Nigel Warner will join the party on Thursday evening. Mowlam needs to be in the House of Commons on Thursday afternoon for Northern Ireland questions.

We understand that following the Dublin portion of the visit Blair will visit Seamus Mallon, David Trimble and Peter Robinson in their constituencies and will make what is being billed as his first policy speech on Northern Ireland. This will be given at a gathering of businessmen in Belfast under the aegis of George Quigley.

### Europe

Blair is likely to raise both Europe and Northern Ireland in his conversations with the Irish side.

On Europe, a major concern of the British Labour Party in Opposition has been to avoid being lured by the Conservative government into positions on the IGC which would make it impossible for an incoming Labour government to reach an agreement with its European partners in Amsterdam next June. From this point of view, Mr. Blair is likely to express satisfaction at the draft treaty prepared by the Irish Presidency. The verdict in the British media, for example of Patrick Wintour of the Observer who is close to the Labour Party, is that the Irish draft has been very well judged and has helped to avoid an unnecessary crisis in negotiations.

Mr. Blair may of course wish to clarify his thinking with the Presidency on specific IGC items and on EMU. Within the IGC, current indications are that the "area of freedom, security and justice" proposed in the draft treaty will give the British particular difficulties. More generally, the problem for Britain is that if it fails to participate in a further deepening of European integration, it may find itself excluded from an inner core within the European Union built around France and Germany - with all that this implies for the future of Britain's economy and culture. Blair's personal instincts favour full British participation in European developments.

### Blair and Northern Ireland

Since becoming leader of the Labour Party Blair, as is well known, has changed

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Labour's approach to Northern Ireland.

Dr. Mo Mowlam and her team have replaced the previous team led by Kevin McNamara and Roger Stott.

The policy of "unity by consent", defined in 1981, has given way to the language of the pre-manifesto of which the key passage is as follows: "On the basis of consent, Labour is committed to reconciliation between the two communities and unity of the peoples of Ireland". We have been told that this passage expresses Labour's basic orientation on Ireland and that it is designed to give a Labour government the flexibility to pursue a "new deal" or "balanced constitutional settlement" along the general lines of the Framework Document.

Under present circumstances, Labour has practised bipartisanship with the Conservative government. Blair's thinking is that (i) Labour must be in a position to deal with both Nationalists and Unionists after a general election, (ii) Labour will want to have a basis for demanding bipartisanship of the Conservatives in Opposition and (iii) an outspoken Labour position now might be counter-productive in that it would tempt the Conservatives to score political points (as happened to Blair when as Shadow Home Secretary he opposed the PTA).

We learn that Blair has been reading the history of home rule under Gladstone. At his meeting with the Tánaiste on 7 November, he commented that under a Labour government there would be no equivalent of the Tory right wing which has been an obstacle for the Conservatives throughout this century.

One of the purposes of Blair's visit to Dublin is to demonstrate that Northern Ireland will be as much a priority for him as it has been for Mr. Major.

What will a Labour government do?

From the Embassy's contacts with Labour MPs - and with officials such as Jonathan Powell, Pat McFadden and Nigel Warner - it is clear that a future Labour government will be comfortable with the acquis of Anglo-Irish relations and with the idea of co-operating closely with ourselves. At the same time, there is likely to be a conscious search for Nationalist-Unionist balance, both in the interests of a comprehensive settlement and because of a residual fear, much less pronounced than in the 1970s, that Labour must prove itself to the British establishment.

If there is a weak point in Labour thinking from a Nationalist point of view, it is

the continuing appeal of a Marxist and/or secular vision of Northern Ireland according to which the search for an accommodation between Nationalists and Unionists or Roman Catholics and Protestants can be presented as an anachronism. According to this view, which is embraced by only a small group of Labour MPs, the Framework Document should give way to a deliberate "colour blindness" on questions of religious and political identity. What is not appreciated by activists of "New Dialogue" - or by some columnists in the New Statesman - is that "colour blindness" of this kind can amount in practice to accepting the UUP case.

Broadly speaking, a Labour government will want to maintain continuity in the peace process. Jonathan Powell has put it to us strongly that it is in everyone's interests for a ceasefire and inclusive negotiations to be in place before a change of government, both because the Conservatives in opposition may make life difficult for Labour as it tries to obtain a ceasefire and because the initiation of fully inclusive negotiations before the general election will bind the Conservatives into the Framework Document, the ground rules, and the other basic elements of the process.

The sister relationship with the SDLP within the Socialist International is likely to continue - althout a formalisation of SDLP-Sinn Fein relations could create problems for Labour.

Labour is giving consideration to a series of "parallel initiatives" to be undertaken in the early stages of a Labour government. It seems that Labour is making plans across the board for its "first 100 days".

In part, such parallel initiatives would cover economic and social issues on which a Labour government should be seen to make a difference to the people of Northern Ireland. There is no sign that Labour will embrace high risk options in this context.

"Parallel initiatives" are also seen as setting the tone for comprehensive negotiations. For example, Clive Soley MP, Labour's chairman of the House of Commons Select Committee, when he was in Dublin in September floated the idea that certain powers - in the first instance, planning powers - should be devolved to local authorities which demonstrably practise power sharing. Jim Dowd MP, a member of Mowlam's front bench team, will be in Dublin on 16 December to discuss North-South issues.

The Embassy has drawn the attention of the Shadow Front Bench to the danger

that parallel initiatives could come to be seen as a "plan B". This could undermine the prospect of negotiations and must be avoided. On the specific issue of encouraging power-sharing at local level by devolving some functions, we have drawn attention to the record of local government in Northern Ireland and to the difficulty of establishing a reliable test of "power-sharing" at this level.

Who will be who under a Labour government?

With Blair, it is probably true that Gordon Brown as Shadow Chancellor and Donald Dewar as Chief Whip go to make up a triumvirate at the top of the Labour Party. The other major figure is the Shadow Foreign Secretary Robin Cook. By a strange coincidence, all four have Scottish background.

Mo Mowlam scores well in the Shadow Cabinet Elections, is a Blairite, and seems assured of obtaining the Northern Ireland portfolio in a Labour government. Speculation in the London Times on 2 December that the job might go to Jack Cunningham seems to be the result of anti-Mowlam manoeuvres by Unionists combined with the over-enthusiasm of Cunningham's supporters.

The appointment of the other four ministers at the Northern Ireland office will be decided by Blair in consultation with Mowlam. It seems likely that at least one or two of the present front bench will survive, including Tony Worthington, Mowlam's deputy. This would leave scope for bringing in one or two others, for example Clive Soley, who in addition to chairing the Select Committee chairs the Agreed Ireland Forum, an internal Labour Party body that serves as a bridge between old and new Labour. A possible outsider to follow is the Welsh MP Paul Murphy, who held Worthington's post for the first six months of Mowlam's spokespersonship.

Labour MPs are currently voting on a proposed "code of conduct" for MPs which crudely speaking has been designed by the leadership to make life difficult for mavericks. As a quid pro quo, backbench committees are to be given a formal consultative relationship with ministers under a Labour government. This enhances the significance of Dennis Canavan's role as chairman of the Backbench Committee. At the same time it may lead to a challenge to Canavan's position on the grounds that he is supposedly too close to the "green" wing of the party.

It seems possible that Roger Stott will be Labour's nominee to succeed Peter Temple Morris as chairman of the British Irish interparliamentary body.

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Kevin McNamara continues to take a close interest in Ireland. So do a number of up and coming MPs such as Peter Hain, Greg Pope, Tommy McAvoy and Bridget Prentice, participants in a visit to Dublin by Labour MPs at the end of March.

Kate Hoey, born in Northern Ireland and said to be on friendly terms with Blair, is the main - and in a sense the only - Unionist voice in the parliamentary party.

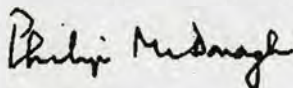
Political situation in Britain

We reported on Friday last on the political situation in Britain.

The basic equation has not changed since then. In a fifty minute television interview on Sunday, John Major kept his options open on EMU and refused to say exactly when and how the decision on British participation will be taken - shades of his position on certain other questions! It is becoming clear - and was explained to us by the Cabinet Secretary at Downing Street yesterday - that there is no immediate prospect of Labour overturning the Conservative majority in the finance committee and other key committees.

As we have reported, therefore, Blair will be relatively confident of being the next Prime Minister. But he is unlikely to have much expectation of this happening before 1 May or perhaps some weeks earlier.

Yours sincerely,



Philip McDonagh  
Counsellor