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AMBASSADE D'IRLANDE
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29 November, 1978

Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

Attention: Mr Hugh Swift

I wish to report that I attended the Debate in the House of Commons last night on the Second Reading of the Bill proposing Increased Representation for Northern Ireland at Westminster.

The Department will be aware that 36 Labour MPs voted against the Government's Bill, including the Labour Party Treasurer, Mr Norman Atkinson MP. It is also significant that about 40 Labour MPs abstained on the Bill despite the operation of a two-line Whip. (A two-line Whip allows for pairing but all other MPs were expected to take the Whip.) Among those who abstained was Mr Jock Stallard who is himself ^aGovernment Whip. When I spoke to him last night after the vote he thought it possible that the Government would ask him to resign his job as Whip as a result of his abstention.

The vote against the Government and the large number of abstentions reflects a dissatisfaction on the part of about 80 Labour MPs with the policy of the Government on the proposed extra seats for Northern Ireland. It is the most serious revolt ^{on Northern Ireland} by Labour MPs that the Government has had to face since Mr Mason became Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Among those who spoke against the measures were Mr Kevin McNamara, who led the Labour Back-Bench opposition to the Bill, and Mr Robert Mellish, one time Chief Government Whip.

There was much less support for the Liberal Amendment to the Bill which would provide for Proportional Representation. Only 27 MPs supported the Liberal Amendment whereas approximately 90 showed that

*and indeed since
Colonel Lodge
left in 1974*

/...

that they were in principle against the granting of extra seats either by voting to reject the Bill (49 MPs including the Liberals) or by abstention (approximately 40 Labour MPs). The next stage of the Bill will be a Committee of the whole House, which will allow for further debate. According to officials in the Northern Ireland Office it is likely that the next stage will be taken after Christmas and possibly in January.

I understand from reliable journalist sources and also from Mr Kevin McNamara that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was both surprised at the extent of the Labour opposition to the Bill and was very annoyed with that opposition.

During a brief conversation with Mr Don Concannon, Junior Minister at the Northern Ireland Office, I asked him if there was any truth in the claim made by Mr Enoch Powell in his speech at Warrenpoint on the 24th November, that all but one of the measures presented at Westminster in the present session extended to Northern Ireland. Mr Concannon said that those powers "reserved" to Northern Ireland will continue to be so reserved. He had in mind here the corpus of legislation enacted by Stormont. In the past the general way in which British legislation had been applied to Northern Ireland had been by way of an Order in Council. They wanted to reduce the number of such Orders in Council where the legislation in Northern Ireland would be similar to that in the rest of the United Kingdom. He added that there was no move to integrate Northern Ireland with the rest of the United Kingdom. They wish to keep Northern Ireland and British legislation separate in order to allow for devolved Government.

I also had a brief conversation with Mr Cooke, Northern Ireland Research Officer at the Conservative Research Department. He told me that Neave would be in Northern Ireland from the 4th - 6th December. While there, he would meet with the DUP, whom he had not met when last in Northern Ireland because of the involvement of the DUP in the riots in Derry shortly before he travelled. He will also meet with those

people who now favour the extension of the British Labour Party to Northern Ireland. When I asked Cooke would he be meeting with the Northern Ireland Labour Party, Cooke said no but that the people he was talking about here were in general people who were "ex-Civil Rights". Neave will also take the opportunity to meet with the security people.

Cooke added that it now seems likely that a SDLP delegation will travel to London on the 7th December to meet with the Conservative Back-Bench Committee on Northern Ireland. Cooke repeated to me what he had already said to Mr Corr, and which the latter has reported on to the Department, that Biggs-Davison will not be replaced as Junior Spokesman on Northern Ireland but that members of the Northern Ireland Back-Bench Committee will be called on on occasion to assist Mr Neave in Parliamentary positions. Norman St. John-Stevas was replying to the Debate on the extra seats because "he was a Catholic". I should mention that a number of Labour Back-Benchers thought that St. John-Stevas was replying to the Debate because the Conservatives thought that the Bill should have been presented by the leader of the House, Mr Michael Foot, whose opposite number is St. John-Stevas, rather than by Mr Mason.

Cooke said that the Conservatives still maintain the fundamental view that what is required in Northern Ireland is a "package" acceptable to both communities. They have no indication that the Unionists at present are willing to take any more account of the minority position than they have done since the failure of Sunningdale. He added that the failure of Sunningdale made it all the more difficult to convince the Unionists of the necessity to take the minority position into account.

I also met with Fred Corbett who has replaced Dick Seeman as head of the Information Side of the Northern Ireland Office in London. Corbett was previously Information Officer in Stormont. He is

from Northern Ireland and as I understand in his mid-40s. He was previously a journalist with the Northern Whig. He tells me that he would not be moving his family from Belfast to London until next Easter and would plan to return to Belfast at the week-ends between now and Easter.

Daithi O Ceallaigh

Daithi O Ceallaigh
Press and Information Officer

cc Patrick Walshe