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Visit of Friends of Ireland

Themes for discussion

Brief for TN
meeting with General
Group 3/15/82
(Perk-)

The Friends of Ireland organisation was established to allow U.S. members of Congress to express their own interest and the interests of their constituents in Irish affairs in ways which correspond to Irish realities. They thus prefer to adopt positions which reflect the concerns of the Irish Government, Irish politicians and representative opinion in Ireland generally rather than respond solely to the pressures of organised lobbies in the United States. They have in their St. Patrick's Day message last year and again this year set out the broad principles which guide their approach. During the period of the hunger-strike, they cooperated closely with the Irish authorities in exerting pressure on the British Government for a solution.

The present visit is designed to give the Friends an opportunity to explore at first hand, through direct contacts, current thinking in Ireland on the Northern problem and to establish an informal link with the Oireachtas. This link would, they believe, provide a long-term mechanism for exchanges and cooperation. On the basis of their visit, they will probably wish to write a brief report which could be issued as a press release and distributed to the wider group of Friends e.g. at a follow-up debriefing meeting. The suggestion has also been made for a meeting of the delegation and the U.S. Administration following the visit.

The delegation does not have detailed themes for discussion as such. Clearly they will wish to hear our views on current issues of concern in Anglo-Irish relations and on our longer term perspectives and objectives. Issues which arise in this context are, for example, the Prior initiative, security matters, the Anglo-Irish Inter-governmental process, the possibilities for progress towards reunification, etc. They will, of course, in all their contacts be asking what they as Americans can do to help. The visit will, therefore, provide an opportunity to motivate the group and strengthen their sense of purpose and identity.

Among the ideas floating within the group (e.g. Kennedy, Dodd Dougherty and Shannon have raised this at various times in contacts with the Embassy) is that the visit might be followed

by a congressional resolution on Irish unity which the Friends would table jointly in the House and the Senate. They would obviously require confirmation through their meetings in Ireland that this would be helpful and receive advice as to the emphasis which a resolution might have. We might consider taking the initiative in raising the idea with them in an exploratory way.

In this general connection, it is unlikely that an Irish unity resolution which the British would oppose would find acceptance with the Republican leadership, the Administration and the many ordinary House members and Senators who have avoided involvement in Irish affairs. Against this, a resolution expressed in weak and ambiguous terms with an eye to very broad acceptance, would not satisfy the needs of most members of the Friends whose Irish constituents would expect any such resolution to offer a clear affirmation of the aim of Irish unity. There is at the present time, moreover, no issue of sufficient visibility and concern in the U.S. to provide a rallying point for the many normally non-involved members behind an Irish-related resolution.

It might be considered that a resolution which (a) expressed itself in favour of unity by agreement (b) requested the administration to encourage the British to promote the principle of Irish unity and (c) requested the administration to clearly reaffirm the Carter initiative would be in itself a useful rallying point in its own right for the Friends and those close to them. Even if its support was confined to those normally active on the Irish issue, it could stand as the basic formal text of the Friends in Congress and allow them to highlight it in their contacts with the Administration.

It would therefore be useful to explore how the visitors would themselves see such a resolution emerging and tease out their thinking on its prospects. As to timing, there is a concern currently in Congress arising from the Falkland crisis for members (at the least) to avoid being labelled as anti-British. Accordingly, any such resolution would probably have to await a reasonable period after the crisis has ended. While timing is currently a sensitive matter, the idea of a resolution would probably merit discussion in Dublin.

The Friends will also hope that in the near future their visit to Ireland might be reciprocated by a group from the Oireachtas. This will presumably be discussed with the Ceann Comhairle and the leaders of the parties as well as with the Taoiseach. As to timing, although this should be for discussion, it will probably be difficult to schedule anything before the November Congressional elections.

One of the questions raised by members of the Friends is the extent to which they should take the initiative in becoming involved in security related issues e.g. treatment of the Nationalist Community by the security forces in the North, activities of Paisley/UDA, etc. This sort of issue tends to be championed by the Biaggi Group (The text of a recent letter circulated by Rep. Hamilton Fish on plastic bullets is attached). Members of the Friends have often felt it necessary to go along with the pressures generated in this area and on occasion senior members such as Kennedy have acted on their own initiative on the issues involved (e.g. Paisley visa) so as to avoid being seen to respond to the pressures of marginal figures. Dodd, in particular has tended to focus on Security issues because of constituency pressures in an area where Noraid and the Caucus are active. However, in general most of the Friends prefer to act on such issues when they are seen to be important for the Irish Government and the SDLP (e.g. the hunger-strike). Moreover there is a broad feeling that it is probably better not to draw the U.S. Congress too much into very detailed aspects of the Northern problem, particularly in the always controversial field of security. Clarification of our thinking on this aspect of congressional relations could usefully be given. In this regard it would seem advisable from our point of view to endorse the Friends' attitude that they should not involve themselves in specific issues such as plastic bullets, Irish prisoners in British jails, H-Blocks etc. but rather should reserve their intervention to particularly grave matters such as a hunger-strike. This would leave them free to pursue actively the fundamental aims of Irish policy.

In summary, subjects which might be discussed with the group are the following.

1. General outline of Government policy on Northern Ireland
2. The Prior proposals

3. The Anglo-Irish process
4. The role of the Friends in the US -
 - (a) vis-a-vis the administration
 - (b) vis-a-vis the American-Irish Community
5. Possibilities of a resolution in Congress
6. Security concerns.