

# NATIONAL ARCHIVES

## IRELAND



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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

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cc  
PDM  
PSS  
Mr. [unclear]  
Mr. Kennedy  
Benn  
[unclear]  
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Mr. [unclear]  
Mr. [unclear]  
Mr. [unclear]  
PH

6 May 1983

Dear Assistant Secretary

I enclose, for the Department's information, a copy of a report on a recent conversation with Mr. Tony Benn M.P.

We felt it was important to maintain contact with Mr. Benn who is of course the single most influential voice on the left of the Labour Party. Because of his association with radical opinion here supporting the Provisionals the Ambassador has felt that his presence at Embassy receptions would not be understood here (or perhaps in Dublin) and for that reason he has not been included in the St. Patrick's Day reception guest list for several years. You will see that he pointedly referred in his conversation with me to the last invitation he received.

Yours sincerely

Paul D. Dempsey  
Minister.

Mr. Michael Lillis  
Assistant Secretary  
Anglo-Irish Section  
Department of Foreign Affairs.

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NOTE

(21 April)

I called recently on Mr. Tony Benn, M.P. . I had asked to meet Mr. Benn and had suggested lunch as a possibility. He responded by inviting me to visit him at his home.

Mrs. Benn joined us for a short time and spoke of her Irish ancestry. She grew up, she said, in Cincinnati, Ohio where there was a large German-American community. It was her experience of discrimination against the Irish in Cincinnati that led her into socialist politics. Both she and Mr. Benn recalled their last visit to the Embassy for St. Patrick's Day noting that they did not normally attend Embassy functions.

Mr. Benn asked me how we saw the situation in Northern Ireland and I briefed him on the various aspects of Government policy at the present time.

Mr. Benn then gave his views on the Northern Ireland situation. He said that the solution of the Northern Ireland problem was a matter for the people of Northern Ireland: it was a mistake for London to think that its efforts could bring this about. There were two supplementary points. First, all public opinion polls showed that the British people were tired of Northern Ireland and he did not doubt that if a referendum were held on the morrow morning there would be a majority in favour of withdrawal. Second, there was a real danger that the authoritarian techniques and approaches being developed in Northern Ireland would be transferred to the mainland.

Turning to the Labour Party, Mr. Benn said that there was widespread support among the constituency organisations for a united Ireland. The trade unions, on the other hand, being represented in Northern Ireland feared that they could be split by the Party's Irish policy. Accordingly, they joined up with the establishment elements in the Party currently grouped around Michael Foot to try to "keep the lid on". The Labour Party was, therefore, "unevenly balanced" in relation to Irish policy: while the Party's programme contained a formal commitment to Irish unity, the next sentence introduced a major obstacle by means of the requirement of consent. He did not believe that the next Labour Government would be prepared to confront the Unionists and accordingly a power-sharing policy, for example, was simply "not on". If, contrary to his expectations, an attempt was made to impose such policies on the Unionists, there would be a confrontation in which the Government would be forced to back down.

Mr. Benn said that his own belief was that a date should be set for British withdrawal or a date set by which it should have taken place. With this in mind he had recently been examining what had been done in Palestine. He felt that a withdrawal announcement would focus the attention of all parties in Northern Ireland on the need to reach an accommodation and would put the moderates in a strong position to come forward with ideas for compromise. It would remove the constitutional question from Northern politics by deciding it and would clear the way for the emergence in Northern Ireland of class politics -

something which the south might not welcome. Mr. Benn stressed that, as I knew, withdrawal was not the policy of the Labour Party nor was it likely to be. He himself might not be a member of the next Labour Cabinet.

I suggested that a precipitate British withdrawal might not be benign: he was assuming too readily that Northern Ireland would sort itself out if left entirely to itself. In reply Mr. Benn was dismissive of what he described as "diplomatic language" which together with pointless official and Ministerial meetings and other cosmetic activity merely concealed the absence of any real political developments. He favoured the decisive impact that withdrawal would have, mentioning the year 2000 as a possible target. He referred to the Nixon principle, the political rule of thumb that deals can only be done by strong leaders representing the full force of their own traditions. He himself respected Mr. Paisley for his forthright and unequivocal defence of the Unionist position. He felt the Irish Government should be equally frank about where it stood. What the Unionists most feared and resented was a lack of openness and the suspicion that deals might be done behind their backs. They had, of course, good reason to be apprehensive. At this point Mr. Benn referred to the fascinating excerpts from the Fisk book published recently in the Times which revealed that Churchill had been prepared to sell out Northern Ireland without so much as consultation with Lord Craigavon. There was no real loyalty in Britain to Northern Ireland and he felt that Mrs. Thatcher would not be prepared to put up indefinitely with the present situation there. If she were

returned to office, as now looked likely, he thought she might turn her mind to Northern Ireland. Although Mr. Benn did not say so explicitly I had no doubt at all that in his view a Government led by Mrs. Thatcher would deal more radically with Northern Ireland after the next election than would a Government led by Mr. Foot. Of Mr. Foot he said dismissively that under Foot we would get plenty of "fudge" in the form of statements, forums and anything else of that kind we wanted but no real action. He was confident, however, that the Labour Party would never again return to the policies of Roy Mason: the recent advances made by the left wing in the Party had at least prevented that.

Mr. Benn spoke highly of Mr. Ken Livingston who with the Labour Party in opposition was the only Labour politician currently exercising real power. It was wrong to suggest that Livingston's Irish policy was dictated by a desire to win the Irish votes in his prospective constituency. He was basing himself on two significant factors, i.e., the widespread support at constituency level for disengagement from Northern Ireland and the fear of terrorist violence. He had put together a fairly potent formula and was very much underestimated.

I explained to Mr. Benn our opposition to a policy of violence and the reasons for our refusal to have anything to do with Sinn Fein. His response was on the lines that one should not bury one's head in the sand and he pointed to the numerous former terrorists who had gone on to become respected

politicians and statesmen. On the other side there was the institutional violence represented by partition. The position he took on Ireland was to some extent in his bones: he recalled that his father had spoken out in Parliament against the Black and Tans.

Mr. Benn felt that the world recession was a major factor in the resurgence of nationalism. In a time of hardship, doubt and confusion people tended to "follow the paper trails back" to their origins. President Reagan's policies represented an attempt to lead America back to the simple verities of an earlier age. In Britain Mrs. Thatcher was openly espousing the values of the Victorian era. The Labour Party was going back to its commitment to disarmament, the Clause TV debate and its earlier traditions. In his view, the international consensus of the sixties and the seventies was disintegrating and the essential underlying national interests were re-emerging. He was himself, he said, <sup>a</sup> consensus politician in the sense that he was working at forming the new consensus which would one day emerge. Whether Mrs. Thatcher won the next election or not, her policies would not form the basis of the consensus of the future in Britain. Mr. Benn went on to say that the extent to which Parliament was out of touch with the people was frightening. The situation was genuinely dangerous and was the fundamental cause of the riots and other forms of unrest which Britain had recently witnessed.

Mr. Benn said that he was flattered that I had come to see him and hoped that what he had said would be of some assistance to us. He mentioned that he occasionally visits the American

Embassy at the invitation of the Ambassador to take part in a seminar with the Ambassador and some of his senior staff who were interested in understanding his views even if they did not share them. (He had put forward earlier in our conversation the view that strategic considerations were a large factor in the continuing White House interest in Northern Ireland, adding that they were no longer an important factor in Whitehall).

(C.P.D.  
May, 1983.)