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The British Political Scene in Late October 1983

1. In London as Parliament resumes after the summer recess Mrs Thatcher dominates the political landscape. Her success in the past 18 months - on the Falklands issue and in the election on 9th June this year gives her an assured position which seems for the foreseeable future to be impregnable to assault from the new generation of Davids and Roys and Neils who have emerged as her challengers. In view of her 144 seat majority and her formidable character it would be prudent to assume that for the foreseeable future Mrs Thatcher will be in power in London.
2. Having said this, however, one would immediately have to offer certain qualifications. It must be remembered that Mrs Thatcher was unpopular before the Falklands war and that the achievement of even that notable victory depended to a substantial extent on luck. This is a vitally important asset for Generals, as Napoleon recognised, but is an asset which cannot always be depended on to last. Mrs Thatcher has taken control of the Conservative Party and her grip on it has been strengthened by the whole Falklands experience. Nevertheless there are undoubtedly many elements in the Tory Party who are antipathetic to her style and manner but who have been subdued or silenced by her evident success. If she should begin to falter they could gain courage and strength.
3. The Parkinson affair coming as it did after muted criticism of the shrill tone on East-West relations which she adopted some weeks previously in North America led to some questioning of her political judgement for the first time since her massive election victory in June. In itself the Parkinson affair has not really weakened her authority but it does serve to show that much of that authority has been due to sheer good luck and that good luck can easily turn.
4. Mrs Thatcher is, of course, relatively young - still in her 50s - but since the election there has been a change

in the leadership of two of the Opposition parties which has meant a skipping over of one generation of politicians. Mrs Thatcher is now faced by three Leaders of Opposition parties in their 40s who are very much of a younger generation. If this Parliament runs its full course she will, by the time of the next election, be in her early 60s and will have led the Conservative party for some 10 years and been Prime Minister for eight.

5. If one looks at the matter from this point of view there must now be quite a possibility that we are heading into the last few years of the Thatcher era. It still remains that Mrs Thatcher is - barring absolutely unforeseen accidents - almost certain to remain British Prime Minister for another three years at least. Of course what matters greatly in our present calculations is that we must expect to have to deal with Mrs Thatcher over the next three years at least. It is well, however, to keep - even if in a corner of ones mind only - the idea that she is not, however durable, a permanent feature of the political landscape here.

6. What about Mr Prior? There is, I think, every reason to believe that he is working to a much shorter time-table and that, assuming he lasts so long, he is unlikely to be still Secretary of State for Northern Ireland by the late Autumn of 1984 - either because of a Cabinet reshuffle or because of a wish on his own part by then to leave. His relations with Mrs Thatcher are clearly not very good and, while the immediate calls for his resignation have died down, he has probably been weakened somewhat by residual effects of the Maze Prison escape. While his poor relationship with the Prime Minister is regrettable from our point of view he remains a ^{prominent} ~~permanent~~ figure who carries considerable weight in his own right and who has been given a certain amount of latitude by her. It is likely that for the moment she prefers to have him remain in his difficult post rather than retire to the back-benches

where he could be a rallying point for greater opposition to her policies.

7. What conclusions might one draw from this in regard to Northern Ireland? We have had messages from several quarters recently indicating that Mrs Thatcher is now establishing a short-list of priorities for her second administration. We are urged strongly to try to ensure that Northern Ireland appears on that list with a higher priority than she is believed to give it at present.
8. These "messages" are no doubt well meant but some at least come from sources close to Mr Prior who may have his own shorter time table in mind in urging early action on our part.
9. I believe it would be wise for us to act as if priorities were indeed being established at present - particularly as there is the added factor of Mr Prior's shorter time-table but that we should also privately allow ourselves a considerable scepticism about the decisive character of any list of priorities which she now draws up. It simply cannot be the case that the British Government, however dogmatic or determined, could now establish a list of priorities which did not include Northern Ireland and hold to it through thick and thin over the next few years. We should therefore certainly try to get across now to Mrs Thatcher the need to address the problem urgently but we should not be stampeded into anything by talk of a decisive list of priorities and we should certainly not rush forward with proposals at the cost of a lack of full preparation on our own side or in such a way as to prejudice the Forum's work.

10. What of other parties in Britain? Because of the present dominance of Mrs Thatcher the question is to some extent academic but it cannot be dismissed as irrelevant since even Opposition party attitudes help to create a general climate for possible action.

11. In summary the position looks somewhat as follows:-

- (a) The SDP Leader, David Owen, referred to Northern Ireland in his Leadership speech at the Annual Party Conference some weeks ago. He stressed the need for consultation with the Republic. In general while not mentioning the Alliance Party by name he seemed to imply support for that party in the context of the forthcoming European Elections. He also touched on the importance of the EEC relationship in addressing the problem.
- (b) The Liberal Party at its Conference last month adopted a fairly advanced position put forward by the Young Liberals which talked of Irish reunification and the establishment of a Council of Ireland. The Party's spokesman, Stephen Ross, representing the Isle of Wight (with relatives of Prison Officers among his constituents) is extremely unhappy about this Party position. The Party Leader, David Steel, is, it seems, prepared to go along with it as a broad statement of aims although he may not agree fully with the detail.

For both these parties loosely yoked together as the "Alliance" an effort will be made shortly to establish a common position on Northern Ireland. It is possible that Ross may lose his position as spokesman for the Liberal Party and that someone with a more "forward" position may be brought into that role.

(c) The Labour Party Spokesman in recent years, Don Concannon, who was formerly a Junior Minister in the NIO under Mason, has probably been a brake on the development of the Party's position which, if his deputy Clive Soley, for example, were spokesman would probably be somewhat more "advanced" from an Irish viewpoint. It is possible that the Labour Party too, under its new Leader, Neil Kinnock, will soon have a new spokesman on Northern Ireland and Kinnock himself may possibly visit Dublin later this year or in early 1984. There is at the same time, from our point of view, something of a problem among some elements of the Labour Party in that they tend to be more ready to deal with a meeting with Sinn Fein and Gerry Adams than we would like.