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AMBASÁID NA HÉIREANN, LONDAIN



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Secret

*Reports from
London file*

Secretary
Mr O Tuathail
A-I Section
A-I Secretariat

3 October 1986

Dear Eamon

A few weeks ago Richard Ryan submitted to me an interesting paper setting out ideas for our Westminster policy up to and through the next British general election. I had intended to discuss it further here and to submit it to you with some additional material from the Embassy on other aspects but our intermittent absences from the Embassy at the party conferences etc and the pressure of other business have meant some delay in doing this.

I feel therefore that at this stage I should send you Richard's paper on its own as I think you will find it of interest and value. I agree with his views about the kind of activity and approach which we should maintain here and agree too with the views about the SDLP profile at Westminster. Since these and other views in the minute are (rightly to my view) frankly stated you will no doubt wish to ensure that the paper is treated with some discretion especially in relation to those mentioned explicitly in it.

Consideration of Richard's paper leads me to suggest that it might be a good idea in the relatively near future when time permits to have a briefing/strategy meeting of some kind involving among others Richard Ryan and Ted Smyth from this Embassy to consider aspects of our approach here in the months ahead.

Yours sincerely

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Ambassador

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SECRET

Ambassador

Our Westminster policy through the next British general
election

The focal point of Anglo-Irish relations and of the Conference over coming months will of course be "delivery" on the Agreement. That said, improvements gained on the ground in Northern Ireland which would be visible to the minority there, and which would be the basic test of the Agreement in its own terms, would, however, be visible here in Britain (in Westminster, broadly speaking, and among the wider public generally) only in proportion to the lessening of media coverage of violence there. That, as we know, is unlikely as, in the short to medium term at least, violence may continue at least at previous levels.

The way the British broadly speaking (that is, other than those few most directly involved) see the Agreement, and Anglo-Irish relations in the Agreement context; and the way in which they see the Union in that context, merit some consideration and, perhaps, certain active attention on our part.

The general transparency of the Irish Government's approach during the Agreement process over the past three years or so; the Taoiseach's high reputation here; our concerted efforts to sell the merits of our analysis and approach to the problem; these points together - very importantly - with the pretty near hopeless performance of Unionists/loyalists, have inter alia cleared a certain space between the two main parties to the Union - the Northern Ireland Unionists and Westminster/the wider British people. This would, of course,

have been inconceivable, say, twenty years ago, but the Unionist bluff has - hitherto - been called, and there is widespread distaste here at Loyalist antics over the past 10 months in particular.

The extreme vehemence of the Unionist/loyalist reaction to the Agreement may have taken Dublin and London somewhat aback, and may indeed have affected negatively the rhythm at which the Conference might otherwise have been expected to operate and deliver; on the positive side, however, perhaps some deep and unpleasant realities about Unionists and Unionism, very familiar to the minority in the North and pretty widely understood in the Republic, but not hitherto at all properly understood at Westminster and in Britain as a whole, are now being brought home sharply here. This process may be of considerable value to us. There is a distinct new appreciation here, too, that Britain's exasperation, hard-trying patience and continuing sacrifice in the teeth of intransigence, stupidity and lack of appreciation, are shared in the Republic by the Government and people in general there. In a curious way we may have come in British eyes to occupy, albeit tentatively at this stage, some of that psychological space that recent events have cleared between the Unionists and the British. A readjustment is taking place in the traditional way the London-Belfast-Dublin relationship is perceived from London. This feeling, distinct at present, is of course a tentative and frail one, and it can at times be damaged - has been - by hiccups in the relationship (at such times the perceived gap between the Unionists and ourselves dwindles and, once again, we all get lumped together as "the bloody Irish" or whatever).

One hears increasingly here, in "sound" circles, reflections as to how long Britain can "keep it up over there" in the face of the ingratitude, the (to the British utterly incomprehensible) unreasonableness, and the general awfulness. It is this that the Conservative friends of the

Union here find most worrying, and correctly so, as they see clearly the damage Paisley, Robinson and the others are doing to the body of the Union they should be nourishing and sustaining for their people. The Union has traditionally been in British minds a number of things. It has been a matter of unquestionable and inviolable principle centering on abstract but strong ideas about the Kingdom, the Constitution and so on (alleged violations of this principle are most frequently raised by Unionists and Conservatives who oppose the Agreement). It has been to do with deep-running religious questions, and, following an Irish neutrality in the last War, it has been to do with a strong sense (now fading) of being let down by the South while being supported by the North. It has been these and other things. But now it has become the thugs on the TV and the ranting - mad - politicians who claim such Britishness but who are more foreign to the average British TV viewer than a Frenchman or worse. In summary, the British, insofar as they think about Ireland, are perplexed: their received general wisdom about the Unionists and the "Southern Irish" do not serve in present circumstances.

At the same time, Anglo-Irish relations have - formally - deepened through the Agreement and, by and large, there is a sense here that a deeper level of respect is reciprocated on both sides. There is probably a general feeling at Westminster, and in Britain generally, in the light of recent developments that more of everything in the Anglo-Irish relationship would be a natural rather than a surprising development. To put it another way round, we are probably now in a unique position to consolidate and build on the goodwill that is flowing in our direction both directly from the Agreement process and indirectly from the effects here of the Unionists' antics in response to the Agreement. The purpose of such an exercise could be twofold: firstly, because it would be a good thing in itself; secondly, because by doing it we are more likely to be able to convince the

British (when the going is good certainly and, perhaps more importantly, when the going is rough and we need our influence all the more) to go along with our analysis of the situation at any one time and with what prescription we believe should flow from that analysis. By "the British" here is meant, particularly and in the first instance, the Government, Junior Ministers and backbench MPs; but it also means the media and, through them, the wider British people.

If, therefore, we are to try to broaden our influence with the British by taking advantage of certain openings presented by circumstances for a while - hopefully - to come, while at the same time pressing ahead with the first priority of implementing the Agreement in its own terms, what ways of doing this come to mind? We might, inter alia, consider the following.

1. Contacts at Westminster

- Our present fairly wide range of contacts should be systematically maintained, and broadened on a selective basis.
- We should begin now to bring small (3 - 4 persons each) groups of contacts in whom we have a particular interest (such as right wing Conservative MPs) to Dublin over a series of visits.
- We in the London Embassy should see whether some acquaintances or near-friends in influential circles could be nourished a bit further so as to try to improve our direct feed-in and feed-back vis-a-vis policy-making here. [When Lord Gowrie was in the Cabinet we were kept pretty well briefed on developments and we had the opportunity to try to influence his input into policy on Ireland.) Such acquaintances might include, inter alia, Sir Geoffrey Howe, Douglas Hurd, Robert Armstrong etc.

(Ambassador Dorr) and John Wakeham, Sir Michael Havers, John Cope, Charles Powell etc. (Richard Ryan).

- Irish Ministers, Ministers of State and TDs generally, over and above those directly involved in the Conference process, should be encouraged to go out of their way to meet with their British opposite numbers and to bring these closer to the whole Anglo-Irish process. The ambivalence shown by many Irish politicians as to contacting and knowing British counterparts is mysterious in itself but, in the present context (a pretty straight fight against those who want to destroy the Agreement) where it is incumbent upon us to convince the British to seeing and agreeing with our perspectives - no one else will do it - such ambivalence should be discontinued: the need to get what we want out of the Anglo-Irish relationship can be greatly assisted by Irish Ministers and Junior Ministers, generally, and backbenchers generally but particularly Government backbenchers. The Conference is the focal point of the Anglo-Irish process, but actively wider and deeper contacts pursued by our politicians at all available opportunities should be encouraged. We at the Embassy can help to advise and facilitate this process. It must be remembered that the vast majority of British politicians have no natural interest in Anglo-Irish relations and have no particular personal need to see the Agreement work. This may be all the more so in the case of British Ministers and Junior Ministers who may feel that their plates are full enough already, but who would by and large be susceptible to approaches by their Irish opposite numbers: inter alia, Brussels provides an ideal context where many such meetings take place anyway and where social invitations from the Irish side must be seen as quite natural in themselves.

- Our contacts at Westminster could be kept in much more regular touch with as and when the additional third secretary (as discussed with the Department) is assigned here. We would envisage keeping MPs regularly briefed with statements, speeches and other material and of appraising them as necessary of our version of events as they may occur. This would make up for the inevitable space that occurs between meetings with MPs at present, where we re-visit each MP much as Halley's comet re-visits the earth - regularly and hopefully interestingly, but with much space in between.

2. Media contacts

Ted Smyth is preparing a separate paper on this important question.

3. SDLP activity as perceived at Westminster

There are aspects to the SDLP profile at Westminster which, it is fully realised, are deliberate and are to do with the way in which John Hume and Seamus Mallon are perceived by the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, for whose support and votes they are pitted against progressively "greener" elements in that community including Sinn Fein.

There is, however, another and, it is suggested important - vital - perception of that profile: from the Government and the Establishment at Westminster.

A number of points may be relevant here.

John Hume is the head of a political party under stress; he is an MEP and an MP. He spends relatively very little time at Westminster, pleading - no doubt very validly - important other commitments in Northern Ireland, in Europe (or in other parts of the world - the Philippines, Africa etc. - on

European business) or in the United States. While accepting without question the validity of this position, the following is also true:

- he is criticised widely at Westminster by people who believe the whole Northern Ireland question at Westminster would benefit from a more active presence by Hume there;
- his third world trips are particularly criticised as being much less important to Hume and to Northern Ireland than the business with which he is directly concerned; it is said that in a context where London feels it is doing its best in trying circumstances to implement an Agreement aimed at helping nationalists in Northern Ireland, and - directly - the SDLP, Hume should do more to help;
- when at Westminster, he is - generally speaking - not "at Westminster" in the active conventional sense: lobbying, using the tea rooms and so on; rather, he spends much of his time in one or two semi-hidden locations of refreshment, mostly in the company of a few regular companions. By and large he avoids Conservative M.P.s: they feel that their side of the House can best (only, perhaps) "deliver" on Ireland, and they find his elusiveness vis-a-vis them and his clear preference for Labour friends to be, to say the least, lacking in pragmatism. He is not felt to be at ease in the Westminster environment, despite the (genuine) desire expressed by many MPs, particularly on the Government side (who are very rarely to be found in the semi-hidden locations, as mentioned above, that he inhabits), who want to engage him in vigorous exchange and to see him more in the swing of things when off the floor of the House.

Seamus Mallon has, overall, made a very good impression and, insofar as he increases SDLP strength in the Commons by 100%, he could help enormously to enhance the SDLP profile at Westminster.

In Westminster, as with so much else, it is not the object but the object seen that matters. There is no doubt whatsoever that our overall case vis-a-vis Westminster is tied up to a significant extent in the way the SDLP is perceived there. Surely Hume and Mallon can protect themselves vis-a-vis their hinterland and at the same time do much more to improve the whole nationalist profile (including our own as we are supposed to exercise considerable hegemony vis-a-vis the SDLP) at Westminster along the following lines:

- Both Hume and Mallon should be vigorously persuaded to take part, albeit briefly (a five-minute interjection from time to time which can if needed be prepared here in the Embassy) in the wider business of the House. Matters to do with agriculture, social welfare, education, housing and so on are, after all, to do with Northern Ireland too. This would make an enormously positive impression widely in the House and on the Government and would very effectively distance the SDLP from the intransigence of the Unionists (only one thing is considered worse at present at Westminster than the absence of Paisley, Robinson and co.; that is the prospect of the return of their rock-drill voices once more).
- Hume and Mallon should be more amenable to going through certain motions at Westminster such as meeting with other MPs, particularly on the Government side. This can be assisted discreetly by the Embassy.
- Mallon should actively go for the potential seat on the Agriculture Select Committee which we have tried to push

his way through discreet conversations with the people concerned in the four parties and with the House business managers.

- Above all, SDLP preparedness to enter talks with the Unionists must be got across much more clearly here. The widely received impression here (rightly or wrongly, and we are concerned here more with what is in fact the case than with what should be the case) is that the SDLP - Hume in particular - may make the right noises and one cannot catch them out on technical points, but they are seen to be not really helping with the task and burden resting heavily in London at present, of trying to get the Unionists back into play. This is a game to be played for the optics, and Hume and Mallon really only have to bang on in Westminster and in the media with their message to the Unionists for this to have a useful and positive effect here. It is suggested that the merit of this essentially cosmetic exercise would be well worth impressing upon Hume and Mallon: our overall London operation, and the way in which the nationalist case is viewed by the Government here and by Westminster generally, would be considerably improved by their recognition of the need to help our broader strategy at Westminster. They are at present seen as loose cannon, the smoke from whose shots is however seen here as rising from within our camp and, that being the case, they should agree to better-directed fire.

4. Contacts with pro-Unionists in London, and (possibly) with Unionists themselves

This question was discussed briefly at the meeting in the Department on 30 July. There is little doubt that our contacts with pro-Unionist figures (Ian Gow etc.) in London deserve continued attention. The question of extending - or trying to extend - our contacts to the more rabid element on

the right of the Tory Party, and even of extending them to Unionists themselves, as and when they return into circulation is, however, another matter.

- The more fanatical pro-Unionist Tories. We have done quite a bit of poaching, if that is the word, among Tory MPs who would otherwise naturally fall into the pro-Unionist (anti-Agreement) camp. My own instinct is to stay away from those whose minds are closed, and those who could mis-represent what we might say to them. I would favour concentrating, rather, on those MPs who are pro-Union but not in consequence necessarily anti-us, and trying to bring them over onto our side or at least to keep them partly out of the Unionist camp.

- The Unionists themselves. By and large the Unionists, if and when they return to Westminster, will not want to talk to us. There are good reasons for us to avoid them, and it goes without saying that we should not be seen to be consciously trying to engineer contacts with them. However, if and when they return to London, and over the period following that, it cannot be ruled out (although it is unlikely) that one or more of them might directly or indirectly (through Conservative friends for example) wish to have some contact. This is not easily feasible in the North and, these days, they don't visit Dublin much. There might be something to be said for deciding at this stage to be prepared to be open, friendly and receptive in principle at least to any hints in this direction that may come, while at the same time of course giving nothing away.

5. The security issue

The success or failure of the Agreement will be judged rather simply (too simply) in Westminster generally and Britain as a whole: when the violence fades from the TV screens the

Agreement will have worked. Of course fundamental misunderstandings about the nature of the problem underly this, but these cannot be simply eradicated.

As stated above, there is a new sense here of how the Republic is like Britain concerned about the problem and is engaged in trying to resolve it. There is, however, a need to develop here a stronger sense of the extent to which the Northern Ireland problem impinges directly upon the Republic and the extent of our security efforts. It may sound a bit cheap, but more illumination of border security work would surely make a strong impression here. Also, when there is a "break" in the security area (arms seizures, arrests etc.), special efforts to amplify these for British consumption would be useful. Examples of Garda-RUC cooperation would be best of all. There is no doubt that all of this goes on and, again it may be cheap to play upon it; it is, however, an area where Unionist/loyalist allegations often go unanswered and it becomes a case of enough mud

As much evidence as can be shown of our security forces and the Garda engaged in the straight fight against terrorism, in a context of cross-border cooperation where possible, would be very useful in bringing home over here the realities on the ground of the security situation, in terms that have immediate meaning for the British.

The Unionists accuse us of ambivalence, and worse, on security; and there is a lack of detailed knowledge over here. The inclusion in speeches and statements, whenever possible, of strong stuff on security policy will find its mark here. There is, perhaps, a general British weakness for strong meat in this area and it is an appetite which in the anti-IRA campaign we should perhaps feed a bit more regularly (through speeches; film coverage for TV; more exposure to journalists; visits to see for themselves by MPs etc.).

6. Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Body

The present position in a word is that Mrs Thatcher has no personal enthusiasm for such things but would probably not impede a sensitively constructed and limited (in the first instance) structure if it did not greatly offend the Unionists. The NIO is definitely against it but their officials' credibility at Westminster is not high (it is felt that they have little or no political feel) and we can hopefully get round that (through King and Scott as well as other central figures who would be consulted. Pro-Unionist Conservative backbenchers, such as John Biggs-Davison, Barry Porter, Peter Bruinvels, Michael Brown, George Gardiner and others, are in fact supportive of the idea, and this is of great importance vis-a-vis the business managers in the House. We have kept in touch with the business managers (John Wakeham, John Cope, Murdo MacLean and others) and are given to understand that they appreciate our approach. Their position, which we have indicated we will respect, is that they have no strong feelings one way or the other; they would strongly favour proceeding with caution; we should not proceed until the Unionists are put to bed one way or the other in their relationship with Westminster - i.e. that this should not be given to the Unionists as further ammunition in their argument with Westminster; that some pressure will be put on the Unionists, this Autumn when the House returns, to come back in out of the cold; that as and when things settle down a bit, we could move carefully on the parliamentary body.

John Biggs-Davison and I agreed (ref. my report of 30 April last) to recommend to our two sides a procedure to get things moving: a meeting between British and Irish parliamentarians in the near future, led on each side perhaps by the two Speakers, Tom Fitzpatrick and Bernard Weatherill. This could be here in London (to take account of Unionist sensitivities) and last one day, taking the form of a morning and afternoon working session, in a Commons Committee room; a working lunch

and, afterward, dinner hosted by the British side. The Speakers could perhaps open the discussion with introductory speeches on ways to broaden and deepen parliamentary relations between Dublin and London, and this could perhaps lead to exchanges of views about possible modalities of a parliamentary body as is envisaged.

As we talked, Biggs-Davison came more and more to support this idea. He said he would try to get a Unionist presence, possibly Jim Kilfeddar, and would perhaps try Lord Brookeborough. On the Commons side he felt Julian Amory should be there. I agreed with this and at the same time stressed the need to balance the Unionist or crypto-Unionist presence, and he agreed readily enough with that. About ten or a dozen on each side was felt to be a good number.

I mentioned this to John Wakeham whose first reaction was positive subject to the time-scale consideration set out above. I also mentioned it to Mr Tom Fitzpatrick T.D. when he was passing through London before the Summer and he was in his first reaction also positive.

It is suggested that we should begin now to gently push the boat out again on this issue - in the first instance with the business managers and, as and when we get a green signal, with Bernard Weatherill (through John Biggs-Davison) and Tom Fitzpatrick.

Parallel political level persuasion of Tom King, Nick Scott and the other Northern Ireland Ministers would be useful as and when opportunities arise in meetings with our Minister.

The foregoing six areas are suggested, therefore, as deserving collateral activity, alongside the Conference process, for the foreseeable future, in order to give the Agreement a broader base in British minds and to take account

of some of the distortions in perception which occur when the Anglo-Irish process is viewed through British eyes.

Richard Ryan

Richard Ryan
Counsellor

19 September 1986