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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

9/23

Secret (special key)

8 October 1986

Dear Eamon,

I sent you recently a paper by Richard Ryan. I am now forwarding herewith a paper by Ted Smyth offering reflections from here which I think you will find of considerable interest. I may offer further comments myself later

Yours sincerely

Michael Don

Eamon Ó Tuathail

A/Sec

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Secretary
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Some personal observations from one "London view" regarding the successful implementation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement during the coming year

6 October 1986

Introduction

1. Clearly, the overwhelming cross party support for the Agreement in the House of Commons last November and the almost unanimous Fleet Street endorsement during the past year are not going to be eroded before a likely British General Election next Summer. But it would be wrong to assume that Westminster and the media will continue to support the Agreement just as it stands under any political circumstances.

2. Already in London there is discussion in media and political circles about the beginnings of a slow down on the implementation of the Agreement. Unionists too detect this easing back on the throttle and will be trying to determine at what point they can exploit British uncertainty to exercise maximum political leverage on the Parties in Westminster. In the lead up to the General Election there are politicians in the Conservative, Labour and Alliance parties who do not wish to go out of their way to offend Unionist MPs; this tendency will increase. On the other hand, given the educative process in the British media regarding Unionist blackmail and bullying, a violent loyalist challenge to the rule of law and the will of parliament would have to be put down forcefully, even by a British Government in a hung Parliament. But the present subtle combination of Unionist grievance and threat poses a greater challenge to the Agreement (as was apparent at the British Irish Association meeting last month in Oxford).

In summary, the apparent intention of the British Government is to stick with the Agreement, but in a low-key, low-risk way while persistently exploring opportunities to get some Unionists on board.

In Mrs. Thatcher's Britain the era of "conviction" politics that crushed the Argentinians, the miners and inflation have now been replaced by election politics which are bound to opinion polls. If the British public's test of the Agreement's success is less discordant noise from Northern Ireland then Mrs. Thatcher will want to appease a section of Unionism somehow. At that stage the problem is that Dublin and London may well have a different view of what changes undermine the Agreement as distinct from enhancing it. Consequently one of the more difficult challenges now facing us is to ensure that the British public become as protective as we are of the Agreement's major achievements, namely the British-Irish political framework for reconciliation in Northern Ireland which is veto free at local level and second, the programme of measures to promote equal recognition of Unionism and nationalism. If, however, the British continue to view the Agreement as merely a cross border security treaty that has produced limited results against terrorists then it would be much more difficult to sustain the Agreement in a meaningful way.

The British Government will have to placate Unionism by denying the nationalists or conceding to moderate unionists?

3. If we allow some or all of the following five scenarios or perceptions to develop further the British Government and public will be more likely to make concessions to Unionists that undermine the Agreement. Some suggestions for altering these scenarios and perceptions are offered below so as to prevent or limit this distinct possibility.

(a) Security Disappointments

There is growing disappointment in Westminster and among the British public that after nearly a year the Agreement is not "seen to work" by hurting the IRA and palpably reducing nationalist alienation. Worse still, the Agreement has alienated Unionists and threatens the nightmare of a British war on "two fronts". And where, they ask, is Dublin's promised increase of cross border security against terrorism?

(b) Nationalist "intransigence"

The general British view is that the SDLP (and Irish nationalism) were handed a present on 15 November 1985. Nevertheless Irish nationalists still expect the British to conduct a bruising campaign against loyalist opposition to the Agreement, opposition which could be reduced if the SDLP made unilateral moves on the RUC and devolution and if Dublin waged an all-out war against the IRA with little regard to financial cost.

(c) Unionist's seek the high moral ground

There has been some improvement in unionist propaganda in Britain which stresses the unsavoury origins of the Agreement, including lack of consultation with Unionists (in contrast to the SDLP). Unionists also criticise the involvement in all aspects of N.I. of the South which is represented as a Roman Catholic State, opposed to pluralism and nurturing a widespread tolerance for the IRA. Furthermore, the Agreement is presented as Mrs. Thatcher yielding to IRA violence, especially the Brighton bombing. Also, Lord Whitelaw has said privately that the Agreement derived from American pressure.

(d) Hung Parliament

There is less willingness in Westminster to push the Unionists further as party managers strive to keep their options open vis-a-vis Unionists with polls predicting a hung Parliament next year. In the British Government this lack of resolve is increased by the fact that the Secretary of State for N.I. is widely known as "no friend of the Agreement" and there is no one else in Cabinet with the exception of Geoffrey Howe who follows the issue carefully enough to exert influence on Mrs. Thatcher.

(e) Instability in Dublin?

Finally, there is doubt in London about the wisdom of remaining too dependent on the present Irish Government for delivery if a change of Government seems imminent. There is speculation that the Irish Government may be unable to deliver on the security side both for financial reasons and because it has to protect its green flank against the Opposition.

Suggested Response to these scenarios:

(a) Security Disappointments

We cannot allow anyone to tie the medium term success of the Agreement to victory against either the IRA or loyalist terrorist campaigns. The IRA have already risen to that challenge with renewed murder and the UDA could open up at any time. What we can say is that the continued implementation of the Agreement will gradually change the judgement of a whole generation of nationalists in Northern Ireland. (However, recent soft profiles of Adams in the Irish Press and McGuinness in the Independent raise questions about a public softening to the IRA in the South).

But for the British public and media we will have to provide much more tangible evidence of increased surveillance activity by Irish security forces, even if successes against terrorism cannot be immediately documented. There has not been one convincing report in the British media proving the major response of Dublin to the growing terrorist challenge. We do not have in Fleet Street a reputation for being rough on terrorism. There may have been many improvements in security but these are not known at general political or media level. The successful arms finds this year are ironically taken as evidence of IRA activity in the South. What is perceived as missing is an all out campaign against the IRA without regard to overtime cutbacks etc. It should also be remembered that most British leader writers read the Irish Times and Sean Flynn's reports on the security forces can be quite damaging. Recently a Sunday Telegraph editor enquired whether King would be looking for a new border Assistant Commissioner and more surveillance in a trade for three judge courts. This is not a case of fighting a losing battle with the British media; there is a voracious appetite in Fleet Street for stories about Irish security and the question arises: can we service this demand quickly and positively at political, official and operational level?

(b) Nationalist "intransigence"

It may not seem fair to the SDLP but Westminster and informed British public expect it to respond to the Agreement now rather than wait for the British Government to "face down" the loyalist veto. From my contacts with a range of politicians and political correspondents and leader writers the SDLP is increasingly vulnerable notwithstanding its protests about the political difficulties of doing more on the RUC or devolution. Hume and Mallon will have to be more energetic in London to maintain their moral and political advantage over Unionists. But if they become scapegoats for growing British frustration with the "warring Irish" then

some new policy shifts will be necessary. (I am incidentally arranging for Hume to meet editorial writers for "full and frank" discussions on the lines of one arranged before Summer).

(c) Unionists seek the moral high ground

Sections of the British "liberal establishment" were instrumental in advancing the rights of Northern nationalism before the Agreement; now some of them worry that not enough was done for Unionists. They need to be reassured that they are doing "the right thing" and occupying the moral high ground until Unionist policies come to terms with the need to respect both traditions in Northern Ireland. This reassurance can be advanced by distinguishing between two types of Unionists who oppose the Agreement:

- (i) First, those with understandable fears and anxieties regarding a new initiative with the Republic which has been maliciously misrepresented by some cynical politicians as joint authority and the road to a united Ireland. (Better not to attack the News Letter campaign publicly on grounds politicians and officials never attack the media).
- (ii) And second, those who refuse to accept the Agreement's guarantee of equality before the law for nationalists as well as Unionists. To this section of Unionists the legitimate defence of the union has been perverted to mean Protestant domination of Catholic rather than the British system of fairness and the rule of law.

The fears of the first group can only be allayed by repeated statements of the actual facts by both Governments; with the passing of time the lies about the Agreement will become more evident and it will seem less threatening.

As for the second group, it naturally disguises its real intent behind a smokescreen of alleged grievances. It is interesting that the Belfast News Letter of 11 September in referring to the "point of principle" involved in opposing the Agreement cites exclusion of Unionists from the Conference as a major grievance. It needs to be stressed over and over again that the Conference is not the N.I. Government but the means for the British Government to receive views and proposals from the Irish Government on nationalist concerns. Whereas Unionist leaders retain their own access to the British Government, some of them have decided instead to boycott it, to wreck the N.I. Assembly and offer the initiative to Unionist terror gangs who rival the IRA in their fascist brutality. Of course, other Unionist leaders are bravely trying to keep constitutional unionism alive and perhaps the offers of a N.I. Council in Westminster etc. should be spelled out for public consumption. We continue to lobby Unionists and Friends of the Union here along these lines (including those few on the media like Charles Moore, editor, Spectator, Bruce Anderson, Sunday Telegraph, Ronald Spark, Sun and John O'Sullivan, Times).

(d) Increased Unionist power in a hung Parliament

Naturally party strategists in Conservative, Labour and Alliance parties are planning for every post-Election eventuality. If deals with the Unionists are being contemplated this is denied in public. Neil Kinnock personally berated Nick Comfort of the Daily Telegraph for suggesting a few months ago that Labour were contemplating a deal. David Owen has not bothered to deny reports that he would consider reviewing the Agreement in a hung Parliament. If it were simply a case of reneging on the Agreement we could work up the British media to denounce political opportunism but a deal with Unionists is very easily dressed up as "a revision of the Agreement to achieve its objectives" (as the Boyle/Hadden paper to the B.I.A. puts it).

As for the British Government sections of Westminster and Whitehall have actually become somewhat proprietorial about the Agreement and impatient with "faint hearts" who make trouble when the going gets tough. But it is also notable how few members of the British Cabinet have wished to defend the Agreement in public, including Tory Chairman, Norman Tebbit and the Secretary of State for Defence, George Younger. It is also notable that the No. 10 machine of Bernard Ingham and company have tended to leave it to the much less effective NIO to sell the Agreement. Some of this distancing results from a longstanding distaste for the N.I. situation but it also signifies a decision not to "go for broke" on the Agreement's success and to sit on the fence in the event of the Agreement slipping back into old-fashioned crisis management by Direct Rule.

(e) An Election in Ireland?

The British Government and (to a lesser extent) media perceive that the Irish Government is weakened by a depressed economy, growing national debt and a reduced majority. We have had some success in dampening speculation about an early election but more will have to be done to underline the Government's determination to serve out its term and deliver on its side of the Agreement (especially those security items that exacerbate the budget deficit). Unfortunately, if we have to admit difficulty in passing legislation for the Terrorism Convention this will strengthen those who argue that it is pointless to do business with a lame duck Government. Whatever the final outcome of the Dail vote it seems essential to proceed with the programme of legislation on the Convention to avoid giving wrong signals to the British public.

Visits to Dublin by groups of British media and politicians this Autumn will be an important part of the effort to reassure London. For example, on 20/21 October Michael

Brunson, ITN, Derrick Hill, Express, Nick Harmon, Economist, Ronald Spark, Sun and John Torode, Independent will visit Dublin to supplement the media visit last June. In addition, it will be important to have visits to London of Government Ministers to speak at editorial lunches, Chatham House, meetings of backbenchers etc.

Conclusion

If all these scenarios or impressions are properly handled then the Agreement still stands a good chance of full implementation during the coming year. Nevertheless, it seems sensible to expect that Whitehall and Westminster will continue to explore ways of dividing moderate from extreme Unionists in an effort to head off the threatened breakdown of order in N.I. They can do this either by refusing Dublin its obvious demands such as three judge courts or offering concessions to Unionists. We may find, for example, that the Belfast Secretariat will again come under pressure as the British explore what they would get if, say, the Secretariat were to be made mobile between London, Dublin and Belfast. In resisting these developments we will need to demonstrate publicly and conclusively that we are being more than reasonable and helpful on security. As for the specific issue of three judge courts it is difficult for us to sell it to British opinion as being "right in itself" rather than a "concession to the Irish" if it is we who are making the running. Nevertheless the arguments against are very thin and could easily be exposed as abject, thoughtless conservatism whereas the arguments for are very convincing to British observers.

We should meanwhile guard against too much emphasis on the Preamble of the Agreement lest this provides a British Government with cover for backing away from the programme of practical reforms in the security and judicial areas while

maintaining an impressive public display of support for the philosophy of the Agreement.

In all of these circumstances, it will be more necessary than ever in "year two" to cling to the moral high ground and remind British politicians, media and public of the undoubted rightness of the Agreement and of all its proposals. For this to work we must show that the Agreement is not only "fair" to both sides in N.I. but that it is beginning to "work". For even with Mrs. Thatcher none of the old certainties prevail: the lady who was "not for turning" now shows distinct rudder problems on sacrosanct public expenditure policies because of growing public criticism. Similarly if the British public continue to see no major security or political pluses in the Agreement that too will affect her commitment. And that is another reason why the Irish Government will have to demonstrate again and again to either a sceptical or indifferent British audience that it is able to deliver handsomely on its side of the bargain.

Ted Smyth