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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

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5 November 1986

Dear Assistant Secretary

In connection with Ian Gow's visit to Dublin next Tuesday, the following brief note on him may be of some use. Please refer also to previous reports of Conversations with Gow (4 March, 10 March, 2 July, 30 July and 25 September).

1. Profile

His starting point on Northern Ireland, not unlike Mrs Thatcher's, was his very close friendship with Airey Neave and a pretty blanket acceptance of Neave's convictions about the sacredness of the Union to the exclusion of any complicating notions about nationalists' rights and identities. While Mrs Thatcher has moved as she did over recent years, Gow has retained an extraordinary sense of a debt of honour, an obligation to carry the torch - such phrases actually recur - in memory of his murdered friend's principles.

His crisis over the past year has been that his other great and deeply felt debt of loyalty and of friendship, is to the Prime Minister. He was famous - infamous - during his period as her PPS for snooping around Westminster and relaying to her tales of her Cabinet colleagues' and other erstwhile supporters' conversation infidelities whether real or imagined. His devotion of rather the lapdog sort was seen by many as a bit painful and embarrassing in this day and age.

His resignation as Housing Minister on 15 November last year shocked the Commons and, it is understood, shocked the Prime Minister. Resignation in that way - on a point of honour and

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conviction to do with an issue not connected with his own ministerial responsibility - was really a thing of a past age and it was seen when it happened as slightly ludicrous.

However, it must be said that the Commons fell very quiet during Gow's long and searching speech on 26 November (attached). There were many comments afterward that some of the parts of Gow which, seen alone were indeed slightly ludicrous, nevertheless, (the old fogey appearance, the fulminating manner, the public heart-searching and soul-wringing) when seen together as then, added up to something which attracted a certain admiration and, indeed, attention. He stood utterly aside from Paisley and the Unionists whose cause he had expoused at great price to his own career ("It is not necessary to have a big mouth or a loud voice to care deeply about Ulster"....."I speak as a Unionist who repudiates today and who will repudiate tomorrow, every kind - I repeat every kind - of unlawful or unconstitutional action.""Unlike others I do not impugn the motives of Her Majesty's Government.")

Gow's case was of course swept away by the historic proportions of the vote on the Agreement, and he faded from sight for a while. His slow extra mures reconstruction over the past year has, it is felt by some of his friends (and I would agree), been personally painful. The people of Northern Ireland have not opened their bosoms to him; the Friends of the Union, funded by Cranbourne, exists in a fitful way, its office and telephone usually unmanned, and it leaves the impression more of whistling in the dark than anything else; his task of persuasion vis-a-vis his Unionist M.P. friends - that they must continue the fight inside the Commons - has so far failed, and it is the success or failure of this task that the Government (and we too?) will most judge him on. It is said that he has become lonely out there and that he misses all the attention and business attendant upon "a job" and closeness to the Prime Minister.

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If the foregoing is true, it is also true that the old fashioned sense of honour and duty that are peculiar - perhaps uniquely so in their extent - to Gow is sustaining him in his present rôle. His conviction is deep enough to not in the end need the adulation and mass-support he might have expected to find in his "Ulster", and there is little doubt that he will continue his chosen task.

2. Steering points

Gow, seen pragmatically, is a force for good. It is his analysis of the problem and his prescription that are deficient, and it is on these that previous efforts to work on him have concentrated and could usefully be developed.

- (i) To be a friend of the Union does not add up to having to oppose the Agreement.
- (ii) It is unfair and unrealistic to point to violence since the Agreement as proving the Agreement's failure: the IRA's and loyalist paramilitaries' pattern of violence since last year show this notion up to be a trap into which he or the rest of us must not fall.
- (iii) Dublin earnestly desires devolution in Northern Ireland and will approach any openings in that direction pragmatically.
- (iv) The Agreement is the landscape of the foreseeable future and he as a pragmatic politician must agree to inhabit that landscape and to make the best of it. Mrs Thatcher, possibly set for a third term in office, shows no sign whatsoever of wavering in her determination to implement the Agreement.
- (v) He could play a vital rôle in bringing the Unionists back into Westminster and in channeling loyalist reactions back to constitutional and democratic methods.

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(vi) He should urge his friends toward devolution.

(vii) The Agreement will not "prolong and not diminish Ulster's agony". Here Gow could benefit from a re-run of our analysis of alienation of the minority as something which if not grasped as we have would indeed prolong Ulster's agony.

Final Comment

I have described Gow as a sort of talking christmas tree. He can get himself on an oratorical high horse and it can be difficult to pull him off it. But he is very good-humoured and enjoys robust exchanges. He is also in his way a very nice man. He is greatly appreciative of this invitation to Dublin and of the high-level meetings afforded him: he will certainly take them very seriously. If the main task of driving a wedge between his position as a Friend of the Union and an enemy of the Agreement can be done even a little bit, then the visit could be very worthwhile.

Finally, it is considered by the shrewdest observers around Westminster that Gow's integrity has come unscathed through the events of the past year; that his otherwise thankless task vis-a-vis the Unionists is appreciated by the Prime Minister, as is his constant rejection of unconstitutional methods; and that he will be restored and given ministerial responsibility again if the Conservatives return to power. He may just, therefore, be a figure who could re-appear on the Anglo-Irish political landscape in a more formal way in the future.

Yours sincerely


Richard Ryan
Counsellor