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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

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CONFIDENTIAL - BY COURIER SERVICE

16 January 1986

Dear Assistant Secretary

A conversation with John Houston, Political
Adviser to Sir Geoffrey Howe

Houston reiterated his conviction that the British made a mess of any possibilities they may have had of ameliorating the vehemence of Unionist opposition to the Agreement. He said that, as a Northerner, all his experiences and instincts tell him we are now in for a very serious deterioration in the overall security situation. He is fearful of large-scale violence developing toward and during the Summer. There are in his view a number of reasons for this over and above British Government insensitivity:

- Unionist politicians have misled their constituents as to what is and is not possible in Westminster;
- their leaders have given the clear impression that a resounding "referendum" (in the 23 January election) will make the Government and the backbenches recoil in horror at their error and this will smash up the Agreement; this expectation will of course founder in the teeth of Westminster's implacability and basic disinterest in Northern Ireland matters;
- nothing will change in Westminster's attitude to the Agreement and the messianic Unionist message will meet a yawn of indifference;
- the Unionist politicians will, therefore, be shown up as not able to deliver on their promises, and they will lose ground to the paramilitaries.

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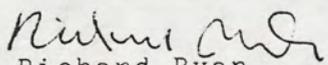
Houston said their assessments of the mood in the North reinforce the fear that we are in for serious trouble.

He is worried that the Unionists and their Conservative backbench friends in Westminster might unsettle backbenchers by making direct links between the Agreement and increased violence/instability. He believes that the game of getting backbenchers behind the Agreement, and keeping them there, is by no means run.

On the Agreement itself, he said (presumably, Geoffrey Howe and himself) they believe that Hume and the SDLP must now help to get the Unionists out of the hole they have dug themselves into. He feels that Hume would have nothing to lose in the present circumstances by indicating willingness to enter talks without pre-conditions. They would, he said, be very grateful if Hume could find some form of words which would bolster morale in the RUC. As to the security forces, he felt that large swathes of the UDR could, in a deteriorating situation, give concrete form to their disaffection from the Agreement; and he believed, he said, that this could happen also within the ranks of the RUC.

Houston is, of course, a very cool and balanced man. For this reason and because he knows Northern Ireland so well, his deep fears for what could happen in the months ahead were the more impressive.

Yours sincerely


Richard Ryan
Counsellor.