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16 January 1986

Dear Assistant Secretary

The State of the British Government

The Westland affair is of course still unfolding and observers take the view that all the implications cannot at this stage be predicted with any certainty. The House last night supported the Government motion but, it is felt, no one doubts that the weight of water behind the dam the vote represents is heavy and if added to could break down the dam.

The main danger for Mr Brittan at the moment is of course the letter of the Solicitor-General, Patrick Mayhew, which was leaked to Mr Brittan's advantage. Law Officers' letters are legally sacrosanct, and the investigation into the leak must be above politics: if the trail leads to Brittan's door, or the door next door, then he must take the consequences.

Meanwhile, Mr Brittan must undergo examination by a Select Committee probably (but not yet certainly) the Defence Committee. While the feeling is that he will be given a hot time, the feeling also is that, as Select Committee procedures are a little unwieldy and lengthy, Mr Brittan may benefit from the inevitable cooling down of the issue that the passage of time involves (on condition, of course, that the Mayhew letter or other, newer, developments do not blow it all up again).

There is no doubt that the affair, even if it runs no further, has damaged the Government:

- Mrs Thatcher is seen as being subject to a pattern of accidents in her second term;

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- her capacity to run her Cabinet and get her way other than by dictatorial methods, her sense of tactics and her judgement are being questioned;
- her incapacity to act decisively vis-a-vis Cabinet colleagues when major problems arise, curiously at odds with her general approach to thorny problems, causes renewed speculation about her self-reliance;
- there is considerable comment on the fact that senior Cabinet voices (Howe, Whitelaw at least) did not come forward quickly to steady the hand at the helm: they all kept their heads down, and this fuels speculation about Cabinet uncertainty and unease.

On the other hand, the feeling among informed observers is that, unless new factors enter the affair, we will see Margaret Thatcher leading the Tories into the next election. In the meantime, it is felt that she would be unequivocal about meeting her commitments to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In fact, the majority of observers spoken to feel that an overall climate of difficulty centring on the Governments' domestic, political and economic performance would make her re-trench all the more in defending the terms of the Anglo-Irish Agreement should the Unionists try to test her will through unconstitutional means.

There is the beginning of speculation around Westminster that, if things picked up a bit for the Government, Mrs Thatcher just might hand the reins over to Norman Tebbit this Spring or early Summer. There are voices - not a majority, but more than ever before, saying things like:

- she is abroad a lot (considered to be a sign of tiring);
- she is bored after so long at it;
- it is a gruelling job;
- Dennis wants her to give it up and has considerable influence over her: the house in Dulwich is now ready;

- she wants Tebbit to succeed her and must recognise that he would need at least 12 months in charge before the next election;

In contrast to the foregoing logic, there are counter-arguments, the chief of which are:

- she could not make what would be tantamount to an admission of failure by giving up now;
- she has a fighting chance of carrying the next election and, while she has that chance, she will not concede it;
- the history books beckon if she can choose her own time to hand over the baton in 1987-'88 - say 6-18 months after the next election;
- she doesn't yet believe that she is beaten.

It is felt that, if she were to concede the leadership now, Tebbit is the obvious choice. It is felt that if this were to happen it would be bad for the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Tebbit, it is said, is cynical about the capacity of any such Agreement to deliver on terrorism and would probably create an atmosphere (with an emphasis on the Republic's responsibility to deliver on terrorism) which would make the implementation of the Agreement very difficult.

On the other hand, if she holds on until after the election (expected in late '87 or early '88), Tebbit's chances may diminish and someone like Hurd could be a possibility. It is felt that Hurd would be relatively good for the Agreement.

Whitelaw has been described as recently becoming much less active and as having become rather disengaged. On Ireland he has been quoted as saying that he saw the value of the Agreement as getting the Americans and other Governments off the back of HMG regarding its policies and actions in Northern Ireland; and that he never expected anything concrete to come out of the actual terms of the Agreement. Overall, Whitelaw is seen as passing slowly over the hill. This is considered to be a pity, as she relied heavily

on him and he was in the main a sound adviser.

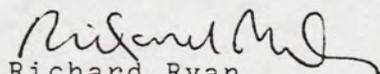
Howe is not ruled out as a compromise candidate (should Tebbit, and the Wets' candidate - probably Walker - cancel each other out), but is thought to need more luck than anything else. He would of course continue to be favourable to the Agreement.

Overall, then, present feeling in London may be summarised as:

- much may happen yet in the Westland affair and Brittan may yet have to go;
- it is bad for the Government whose future, however, is not yet threatened by it;
- Mrs Thatcher is thought to be considering resigning in Norman Tebbit's favour this Spring or Summer, but is not under pressure to step down;
- we have no major new reason to conclude from recent events that our prospects of dealing with Margaret Thatcher until at least the Summer of 1987 have greatly diminished.

Overall, also, however, there is a strong feeling that there may be factors as yet unseen which, when dragged into the light of day may enlarge the terms of reference of the present mini-crisis. We will continue to comment on developments as they arise.

Yours sincerely


Richard Ryan
Counsellor