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6th March 1986

Critical Reaction to the Unionist Strike from British
politicians and media

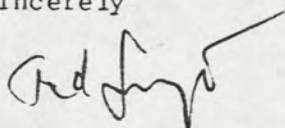
Dear Assistant Secretary

I thought it would be useful to summarise some developments during this week in relation to the Unionist strike on 3 March.

1. The British editorials have largely been very critical of Unionist violence echoing the line from Tom King and Bernard Ingham's Lobby briefings that continuation of such tactics is jeopardising the union. The Times has been most supportive as have been the Express, Mail, Guardian and (in a column) the Financial Times. (The Mirror called as usual for British withdrawal).
2. However, by Wednesday morning the Telegraph and the Sun were advocating concessions to the Unionists short of abandoning the Agreement. This was echoed by to some extent Mary Holland and the Irish Times editorial. Des McCartan of the Belfast Telegraph phoned me to confirm that Dublin was as firm as London in refusing a freeze of the Agreement. I phoned you and received confirmation that the Minister's position was as stated in the Irish Times on Monday. McCartan then wrote the attached story but phoned in some puzzlement in the afternoon following a conversation with Roy Lilley, his editor. He said Lilley had met the Taoiseach on Tuesday and understood that there were three reasons why the Agreement had to be implemented but also understood that if the British were to suggest to Dublin a short period of delay of meetings (say 2 months) there would not be too many objections. Hence the editorial (also attached) saying the Agreement "need not be activated". I have avoided pursuing this matter with McCartan.
3. On Thursday morning the Guardian in a rambling editorial suggested some adjustments (more scrutiny for example) in Conference meetings but not cold storage. On Thursday afternoon in the House of Commons Margaret Van Hattem of the Financial Times said to a group where I was present that there was talk of having one Conference meeting at the beginning of a month and the next at the end which would allow a two month gap for devolution discussions. She had written this for the FT that day (although it was not in our edition) as "there was a certain readiness in Dublin and London to be flexible with the timetable of meetings".

4. Shortly afterwards Geoffrey Parkhouse of the Glasgow Herald quoted Tim Kilfedder as saying that Mrs Thatcher told that there was no possibility of delaying meetings or to be seen to give in to violence.
5. The Lobby correspondents are quite amazed how hostile most Tory MP's are to the Unionists since Monday. Michael Jones, Political editor of the Sunday Times is now devoting a major Irish issue this Sunday about the implications of this Westminster reaction for the union. He quoted one "orange" Tory MP as saying the Unionist party used to be "the mobs running the yobs, now its the yobs running the mobs". (Jones also said that his editor, Andrew Neil is furious with John Hume renaging on an article for Sunday on the grounds it would cause trouble with the unions. He threatened that he'll never get an article published again while he is editor). Peter Bruinvels, one of the hard right MP's, confirmed this to me today by coming up and saying that if he had been recognised by the Speaker on Tuesday he would have denounced the Unionist strike. His main fear regarding the Agreement remains the possibility of Dublin interference in the UK judicial system.
6. Incidentally, I spoke to the Labour Party Head of Communications, Peter Mandelson, about the Daily Telegraph and Standard reports of Labour soundings with Unionists about a pact in the event of a hung Parliament. He says that the story is without foundation and arose from a lunch which Nick Comfort of the Telegraph had with Kinnock's press aide, Patricia Hewitt. They were discussing the likely influence of the Alliance in the next Parliament and she said not to forget the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists and the Unionists. Comfort read too much into this aside and when Kinnock saw the story he spent an hour with him claiming there was nothing in it.

Yours sincerely



Ted Smyth

pl. cc. Mr D. O'Brien

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