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30 July, 1986.

Mr. E. O Tuathail,
Assistant Secretary,
Department of Foreign Affairs.

HC 12/8/86 S24404
Proter model bath
Woods & Sand 24404
to BO Ballagh

Dear Assistant Secretary,

Dinner with Ian Gow, M.P., Jonathan Aitken, M.P.,
and some others

Gow hosted a dinner for me at Pratt's Club where there is only one dining table around which present members sit at dinner. It became quickly clear that I was pretty well included on the menu: Gow had, it seemed, mentioned to Jonathan Aitken, M.P., and a group of other friends - mostly highly successful figures in business, banking and so on - who have an interest in the Irish matter largely because their friend, Gow, resigned from the Government over the Anglo-Irish Agreement, that we were to have a conversation about the Northern Ireland question.

In private, before dinner, Gow said he deeply regretted that their efforts to get the Unionists to return to Parliament (most particularly on the occasion of the recent dinner with the majority of the Unionist politicians at Westminster at the Carlton Club), have so far failed. He is aware that the Unionists cannot play the abstentionist game indefinitely, and that the Autumn may be significant for this as for other aspects of Northern Ireland business. I did not mention conversations the Ambassador and I have had with John Wakeham and others whereby we are pretty well in touch with all this from the business managers' perspectives at Westminster; rather, I expressed fulsome hopes that Gow and his colleagues will succeed in their important task of persuasion.

We rehearsed on both sides, but without any acrimony - indeed, with a great deal of Osric - like flutterings attendant upon any conversation with Gow - our armouries of arguments for and against the Agreement. As time passes he is, he said, reinforced in his view that the Agreement will cause more bloodshed for no good return; that "it will prolong Ulster's agony"; that it will not produce any significant results, and that the Unionists will not weary as time passes in their opposition to the Agreement (he is, he said, utterly convinced of the last point). On the other hand, he was effusive in his obeisances to our Government's motives and the genuineness of our convictions: he just thinks our case is mis-founded and, large as he is, he wriggles deftly from the grip when he is invited to give a counter analysis of the best way to deal with the broad problems of an alienated minority in a State run by his friends (he acknowledges that his friends are not the kindest when it comes to our own in Northern Ireland, but this, of course, merely reinforces further his own integrationist beliefs).

When we sat down with his friends for dinner he produced a heavily underlined and annotated copy of the Agreement and used this, with the well-rehearsed arguments which we are accustomed to hear from the floor of the Commons, to open and pretty well lead into a round table discussion. This lasted five hours during which one's only ally was the port decanter which one pushed round at them as fast as possible, all the quicker to wear them down.

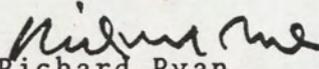
> Aitken is a high Tory - landed, aristocratic, rich. He was born in the British legation in Dublin during the war and knows Anglo-Irish Ireland very well. He has a great affection for us (touched with a hint of benevolence) and he supported the Agreement last November. However, he said, the niggling doubts which he quelled in November are now growing within him and he feels the Agreement may have been a mistake, that it may have hooked HMG and Westminster on something that may produce little or no positive results but, rather, may reap trouble which they may not easily get out of. He would, he said, literally love the Agreement to work and, supported noisily by the assembled diners - and Gow - he said the one thing that would raise the cloud-cover now settling on the whole thing would be some major success in the security field. All in all, the group felt that this would have a major effect in countering a growing doubt and weariness both at Westminster and more widely. They gave the impression (also being gained pretty constantly around Westminster these days) that the last thing they all want to hear is Dublin and London both banging on about their commitment to the Agreement while nothing comes out of it and the killings go on - now even more revoltingly, they say, with the resurgence of sectarian killings. In reply to all this I tried to suggest in the most general terms that the work of the Conference is inevitably comprehensive and will take time to bear major fruit. This and related points seemed to have an effect on most of them (Gow aside).

Overall, and again leaving Gow aside, the mood was of some scepticism but a continued preparedness to be proved wrong, allied to a blunt Saxon sense that the bottom line, when all the talking is finished, is a major breakthrough on the security front. On the latter point they all agreed that a measure of good luck is also essential. No-one questioned our commitment to the fight against terrorism and several were at pains to stress their understanding of our Government's position here.

Gow and Aitken both - separately - suggested further contact and conversation next September, and this was agreed.

The group parted, fairly refreshed, in the early hours, pretty well talked out for one night.

Yours sincerely,


Richard Ryan,
Counsellor.

c.c. Ambassador London.