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8 July 1987

PSS
AS @ Mail
Counsellors A.I
A.I Secretariat
Box.

Dear Assistant Secretary

Lunch with Rev. Martin Smyth, M.P.

We had a preliminary conversation at the opening of Parliament on 25 June. Smyth was friendly on that occasion and expressed a wish to continue the conversation over lunch. I took him up on this and we met today.

He was very courteous and, although I exercised some care in what I said, he did not seem to be probing for anything like compromising conversational slips.

He was critical and dismissive of John Taylor whom he considers bombastic and a talker who does not assess his inability to deliver on his promises and assertions: here he mentioned the declaration Taylor made late last year that he would field nine Orange candidates against pro-Agreement Conservatives in Scotland. In the event of course none were fielded, but Smyth was dismissive of this also because Taylor had proposed that Unionist funds be used for the campaign: Taylor's constituency, said Smyth, is the only Unionist one that is in debt to the party's political fund.

He was also critical of Harold McCusker as naive, unsteady and explosive.

He sees himself as James Molyneaux's logical successor but he does not foresee this development for the foreseeable future.

He was frank about the pressure on him and the other Unionist M.P.s to return to Westminster and he conceded that even if their stated purpose, to test the water and retreat again if they do not get a

satisfactory response, is not successful, they will probably have to remain nevertheless at Westminster.

He accepted ruefully that the perceived association, in the mind of the average Westminster M.P., and of the average British citizen here, of the Unionist politicians and the loyalist antics since the Agreement, has deeply damaged their cause. He agreed too that a breakdown of the broad bi-partisan Northern Ireland policy at Westminster would in a referendum in Britain, or if the question became an election issue, produce a vast majority in favour of British withdrawal from Ireland.

He has, he said, a fundamental distrust of the Foreign Office and the Northern Ireland Office. Whether or not Mrs Thatcher is a Unionist has, he said, no meaning for him: she is in the grip of "vipers" in Whitehall and he is convinced that the very Union is at deep risk in their hands.

Over a long (three hour) discussion, he said he accepted that only the British have any choice in Ireland, the choice to pull out, and that the rest of us will in the end have to accommodate each other. His two consolations at present, which encourage him to feel that a federal, or confederal settlement, or whatever settlement in Ireland, will not come for some time to come, are the Republic's economic failures and its failure to become a modern relaxed, confident society like, for example, Holland or Denmark. He feels that the Republic's Roman Catholic conservatism will continue to be a political card in the Unionists' favour for a long time to come, and that, despite Britain's deep wish to get out, it cannot while the Republic is clearly economically unviable and basically unsympathetic to the Unionist identity. He finds further consolation, he said, in Articles 2 and 3 of our Constitution and he hopes that we will not get rid of them.

His politeness did not prevent him becoming warm at times. For example, he alleged that our Minister for Defence, on a recent border tour, when greeted by a British soldier from the other side of the border, turned his back and refused to acknowledge the courtesy. He went on, developing out of this, to allege that all

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the talk of increased security co-operation is a sham and a smoke screen. He claimed that there was in fact better security co-operation ten years ago, that the new formal machinery under the Agreement is, again, just a smoke screen, and that, for example, he was escorted ten years ago to Dublin by the RUC without any fuss: now there is a hoo-ha if a British soldier steps over the border.

Despite a lot of negative carping, along the lines of the foregoing, he accepted several times that the partners to an eventual settlement must be the people living in the island of Ireland. He said he accepted too that if the Anglo-Irish Agreement worked in areas such as community - security forces/police relations - and he does not accept that it will work - then the IRA would lose the support it badly needs.

He said there is fairly general contempt in the Unionist community for Brian Mawhinney who has come back as a Englishman but in the conviction that he knows better than the Unionists what is good for them and for the Union.

He was also quite dismissive of Peter Viggers who in his view has no interest in Unionist fears and preoccupations.

He was, he said, very happy that Nick Scott has been "got rid of", and that John Stanley is his replacement.

He said that the general view of Ian Gow and the Friends of the Union is that they are not totally in touch with real Unionist fears, and that their worthy but rather high-flying rhetoric has a nineteenth century ring to it: it may have merit at the level of principle, he said, but it is not in fact making discernible progress on the Unionists' behalf.

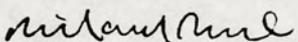
Smyth said that there is no lessening of the Unionist community's opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. However, he said also that they now know that the Agreement is not going to be got rid of. When I asked him what he realistically expects to happen in the medium to long term, he said that he foresees at some point a negotiation involving Dublin, Belfast and London. He thought that this could lead to the beginning of some formal links between Dublin

and Belfast, that these would have to be developed very slowly and over a very long period, and that a British guarantee of Unionist interests would have to be an essential element in it. It is probably true to say that Smyth was here not so much speculating on what he wants to see happen as on what he feels the minimum concession that the Unionists will have to make in the long term will be.

On the short to medium term, he said that, in his view, even if the Unionists and the minority got down at political level to discuss some initial strands of devolved responsibility, they would in practise prove unworkable: even if the politicians could agree, he said that at the lower official levels of implementation (and he cited education as an example) there would be mayhem between bickering officials from the outer edges of both communities.

At the end of our conversation we went back to the Commons together. Smyth did not seem in any way bothered by us being seen together, which we were by a lot of M.P.s. Finally, although he said that he felt that our meeting was a good thing in itself, he did not believe that it would make anything happen (he cited a meeting some years ago with Sean Donlon in this regard). It was he, however, who suggested that we might nevertheless have a further exchange of views, perhaps after the Summer.

Yours sincerely


Richard Ryan
Chargé d'Affaires a.i.