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26 March 1987

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Mr. Eamonn O Tuathail
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Eamonn

I had dinner last night with Ronnie Spence, Under Secretary in the Central Secretariat. The Central Secretariat functions as the old Stormont cabinet office. It coordinates the administration of Northern Ireland departments and is responsible for the relationship between the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland departments. Ken Bloomfield, who is the head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, is in charge at the Central Secretariat and Spence is his deputy.

Brian Mawhinney, who is a junior Minister at the Northern Ireland Office, among his other duties, co-ordinates the presentation of Government policy in Northern Ireland. He has initiated regular meetings of senior civil servants in connection with this role and has asked Spence to take the lead at these meetings. Spence said that he has been pressing for some time for King to make a major speech on security, preferably before the coming into operation of the new Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order on 31 March next. The purpose of the speech would be to publicly clarify the role of the police. That role is to secure the peace for everybody in Northern Ireland, irrespective of their tradition. Spence wants to underline that the police themselves are subject to the law, that they are bound by the law and that their purpose is to enforce the law. He would hope that the speech would encourage

the two communities to support the police in their efforts against violence and against terrorism. King has so far resisted giving any commitment to a speech on these lines. King can be very indecisive but Spence was hopeful that he might be brought to deliver a speech on the above lines over the weekend.

He said that he and the Northern Ireland Office have been encouraging the police to keep in regular contact with local community leaders, politicians and clergymen. We have in our contacts encouraged this policy. He claimed that this policy was having success in some nationalist areas. He was encouraged by the situation in Downpatrick where the police have been calling to schools and youth clubs and various other community groups. He was surprised, however, to learn recently that the local SDLP in Downpatrick seemed to be unaware that the police had found widespread acceptance among the Catholic community in the pursuit of this policy. Spence thought that the result had been a lessening of tension between the police and the nationalist community and a greater sensitising of the police to the problems which exist. The relationship now built up could also help in future as and when problems arise.

He said he intended to suggest to Ministers that when they next met John Hume they should suggest to him that meetings be organised between the SDLP and senior officials in different Government departments to discuss specific areas of mutual interest. He gave housing as an example where he thought an informal meeting between SDLP representatives and high-ranking officials could have useful results for both sides. Contacts of this nature could help to break down any barriers which might exist between nationalist politicians and Northern Ireland officials. They would also provide a useful opportunity for the SDLP to put forward their views on specific topics, while at the same time permitting officials to explain to the SDLP the situation as they saw it. He would not envisage that British Ministers would be present at such meetings.

Spence said that the present political position in Northern Ireland is very unsettled. The OUP is in more disarray than ever and the ability of the two unionist leaders, Molyneaux and Paisley, to coordinate their position is decreasing. A recent example was the public differences between Molyneaux and Paisley on plans to mark with demonstrations on 11 April the coming into force of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order. Dissatisfaction with OUP policy is widespread. In the recent by-election in Castlereagh, in a blue collar area, voters at the door steps told the successful OUP candidate that they would vote for him only on condition that he involved himself in politics and distance himself from the abstentionist policy. In addition the Alliance candidate performed well. Opposition to the Agreement continues as do the difficulties for unionist politicians in participating in the district council chambers with Sinn Fein councillors, who they believe finger unionists for assassination by the IRA. In addition unionist politicians remain firmly set against power-sharing. Spence said that this opposition to power-sharing is widespread, not only within the political parties, but within the unionist community. In these circumstances he thought that the McCartney campaign for equal citizenship, which in effect is intended to produce integration, could attract increasing support within unionism. He went as far as to say that if circumstances do not change the OUP could disintegrate after the next Westminster election. He thinks it quite possible that Molyneaux, who is becoming increasingly tired, could retire after the election. The most likely successor is Martin Smyth. Molyneaux has little control over McCartney, John Taylor and some others but Smyth would have even less control. He also feared that a few more atrocities like that committed on Monday night, when the PIRA killed a prison instructor and two policemen, could tip the scales in terms of sectarian passion and might even precipitate civil war.

Spence is firmly of the view that the only long term solution to the problems of Northern Ireland is one which recognises and accepts the continued existence and the continued legitimacy of

both nationalist and unionist traditions. He is a firm supporter of power-sharing. He does not, however, think that power-sharing will become attractive to unionists until such time as it becomes clear to them that the SDLP are prepared to work the system. Spence, who was involved as a civil servant in the power-sharing administration in 1974 and, who was very closely involved in the establishment of the Housing Executive, was surprised in 1974 that so many unionists wrote on constituency business to the SDLP members of the Executive. It was accepted at that time in the Northern Ireland Civil Service that three SDLP Ministers in particular, Hume, Currie and Devlin, were seriously prepared to work the system to the advantage of all in Northern Ireland. Spence believes that the SDLP must now find some way of convincing unionists that they are seriously interested in working with them. He thought a very powerful signal could be given were a leading SDLP member to put himself forward for an important public appointment, for example, on the Police Authority. Such a person would have to give up active political involvement but to do this would be a very effective boost to the SDLP image in unionist eyes and could unlock the future.

Spence mused that it was a pity that somebody like Austin Currie had not been put forward by us for the Chairmanship of the Police Authority. It would have been necessary for Currie to give up an active role in politics but Spence was in no doubt that if we had put forward such a candidate the Chairmanship of the Authority would have been ours. He also thought it important that the SDLP change their public policy towards the police. The role of the police has changed significantly under the leadership of Hermon and as a result of the Agreement. If the SDLP could find a way of indicating that they accept the police this would have a profound effect.

Irish Language

We have made a number of proposals with regard to the status of the Irish language in Northern Ireland. Spence said that these

have been examined very carefully and that the Northern Ireland administration has put proposals to King, who "cannot make up his mind". He said that they have produced an ordnance survey map of Northern Ireland with the place names in Irish. King's response has been to ask why the publication of such a map cannot be undertaken by private enterprise. They are also ready with the list of the Irish language forms of postal districts. They have accepted most of the names which we provided except for the small number of names which are English in origin, for example Crawfordsburn. They prefer to leave such names in English only. They have now come round to the view - which we originally proposed - that the only solution, in the short term, to the erection of street signs in Irish is to repeal the 1949 Act, which prohibited the erection of street signs in anything other than English. The question of how to test public opinion in a particular street, or how to force unionist councils to comply and to pay for the erection of street signs in Irish, is a much more complicated and difficult legal area which he thought it best to leave aside for the present. They are ready to provide funding for Queen's University to carry out research so as to draw up a gazetter of the Irish version of all place names in Northern Ireland. They estimate this research would take five years. They have had a discussion with the Arts Council concerning support for the Irish language and culture and this discussion has been fruitful. On official correspondence I reminded him that we had asked that they accept correspondence in Irish rather than request a translation, which has been their practice. He said that many Government departments now accept letters in Irish on an ad hoc basis. The principle is still under consideration at official level. Their fear is that Sinn Fein would take advantage and would swamp a minor office, such as an environmental office in Fermanagh, with copious correspondence in Irish which that office would not be able to handle. I told him I thought this was unlikely.

The overall difficulties with the proposals on the Irish language is that King has not made up his mind and is fearful of

the consequences. I suggested that it might be useful at this stage to have another meeting in the Secretariat on our proposals on the language with a view to pressurising the Northern Ireland administration and King into action. He thought this a good idea.

I also raised the Short Strand Naiscoil with him. What has happened here is that the Provisionals have taken over the St. Matthews Tenants Association, in whose premises the Naiscoil meets, with the result that the British, in line with their stated policy, have felt it necessary not to renew the support heretofore given towards the salaries of two teachers and a mini bus driver. Following lengthy discussions in the Secretariat and elsewhere Glor na nGael were asked by the SDLP to take over the management of the school. In that event the British agreed to continue funding for the school subject to Glor na nGael making determined efforts, in which the British would assist, to find alternative premises. Glor na nGael said they couldn't do so. I understand that at a recent meeting of the Tenants Association the officers refused to allow their usual annual election stating that they needed to consult with others "outside", whereupon more than a half of the residents walked out. Spence said they are trying to arrange a meeting between Scott and Glor na nGael. He said they will do everything in their power to resume the funding for the school but they cannot provide funding which could benefit St. Matthews Tenants Association as long as that Association is controlled by the Provisionals.

Education

I also suggested that we have a meeting on education in the near future. The Permanent Secretary in the Department of Education, Parkes, when he was in the Secretariat to dinner recently, said that his officials would be happy to come to the Secretariat to discuss with us and with officials from Dublin the position of the Irish language in the educational system in

Northern Ireland. Spence saw no difficulty with this and suggested we might give consideration to having a broader meeting on education at the same time. He said that they are having real difficulties with the maintained secondary schools (Catholic) in Northern Ireland. Because of the localised control, there has been a tendency for teachers to return to the locality in which they themselves were educated. In fact, preference has been given in placing local people in senior appointments. The result has been that the quality of teaching in the maintained schools is not as good as it should be and is not as good as that in the State sector. A further problem has arisen because in some instances the quality of equipment in the maintained schools is not as good as that in the State schools, for example, in science and engineering, leading to a lack of skills required in the engineering industry. He said that the Northern Ireland Educational Authorities had recently met with the Catholic Hierarchy here to discuss these problems

Discrimination in Employment

I asked Spence what was the response in the Northern Ireland administration to the proposals which we had made on discrimination in employment. He understood the concerns we have expressed about the dangers which might exist in the interval between the publication of the Government intentions and the completion of the legislation giving effect to those intentions. That period might amount to two years or more. They had however taken fright at the proposal in our paper that the Anglo-Irish Secretariat should work on the possible elements in an interim package designed to have effect during that interval. He had stressed to his colleagues that this meant no more than an interest in finding a solution to the problem. It did not mean we would become involved in the administrative machinery. He believed this had calmed fears. They had difficulty with some other suggestions we had made on which he did not elaborate but on the whole they found our paper positive, practical and realistic.

We had a fairly lengthy discussion on the MacBride principles. There has been a campaign by the British in North America designed to convince people there that the MacBride principles, if implemented in toto by a company in Northern Ireland, would be in breach of the 1976 Fair Employment Act and would leave that company open to prosecution in Northern Ireland courts. They believe the principles only serve to hinder investment in Northern Ireland by American companies and could lead to disinvestment by companies already here. Gilliland, who was head of the NIO Press Office, is in the United States at present spending the last three-four months of his service on this issue. Scott is there at the moment on the same task. He will be followed by Mawhinney and it is possible that King will pay a visit after Easter. Speaking personally to Spence I said that I thought the British had lost the war. I said there is an increasing number of Irish Americans in support of the MacBride principles and that our friends in North America did not understand why the British should be so opposed to them. The consultative document issued last autumn on equal opportunities in employment showed an awareness on the British side of the continuing problems in discrimination in employment in Northern Ireland. Reputable groups, including the Irish Government and the Standing Advisory Commission on Human Rights had made detailed observations on the British proposals. It should be possible for the British to bring forward new proposals which would have a significant effect. I suggested to Spence that it might be now be opportune for the British side to re-examine their position on the MacBride principles. Are they really convinced that the principles contravene the 1976 Act? If they are illegal under the 1976 Act it might be worthwhile to ensure that they do not contravene the replacement for the 1976 Act which is now being discussed. Would it not be best, in North American terms, for the British to state that they agree with the purpose of the MacBride principles and that they intend to give legislative effect to this in the context of their new proposals?. Spence took this on board but left me with the impression that it will not be easy for them to change their view on the MacBride principles.

Cross-Border Economic Cooperation

I told Spence that I thought that the new Government would put particular stress on the development of cross-border economic cooperation. We discussed the proposed North-West study at some length. Both Governments are agreed in principle on a study but it is bogged down because the two Governments and the local councillors concerned have been unable to agree on the terms of reference. The locals want the possibility of an integrated operation for the area to be included in the terms of reference. The British are opposed. Until quite recently our view, in accordance with the views of the Department of Finance, had been similar to the British. That Department is now prepared to accept the inclusion of the possibility of an integrated operation for the Donegal, Strabane and Foyle area in the terms of reference. Spence saw no possibility that the British side would change their view. He said their fingers were badly burned with the integrated operation in Belfast and with the ensuing long row over additionality. They do not want a repetition and are deeply opposed to any reference to an integrated operation in the proposed North-West study. I stressed to him that our position had changed and I asked him to reconsider. He undertook to do this.

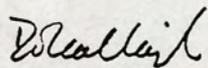
Public Appointments

Towards the end of our conversation Spence raised the issue of appointments to public bodies. He was grateful for the names which we had given them. But he mentioned that they already had 16 of the 33. Most of the others were either political activists who are unacceptable for most public appointments, or were school teachers who in many instances do not have the technical and professional background best suited for specialised public appointments. Where our candidates had the required qualifications they had been successful because Ministers and the Northern Ireland Civil Service want to have more nationalists on public bodies. He thought that it now

necessary for us to broaden and deepen the range of people whom we are putting forward for public appointments if we are to be as successful as we wish.

Finally he said that Ministers in the NIO are clearing their desks at present and most are arranging to take holidays over the Easter period. The conclusion drawn by the civil servants is that it is almost certain that there will be an election in June.

Yours sincerely



Daithi O Ceallaigh