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Public interest in the Stalker affair in Britain

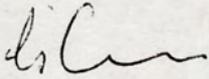
1. As reports from the Embassy London on this brief demonstrate clearly, public interest in the Stalker affair in Britain continues at a remarkably high level for a story shortly about to enter its third week (i.e. since the AG's announcement). In the Commons, in the media and indeed among the general public, there have been the strongest indications that unease about the Attorney General's announcement and its implications is widely and deeply felt. The fact that the affair dovetails with other recent controversies there, particularly in the 'official secrecy' domain - "Spycatcher" etc. - gives it a strong domestic dimension that other stories relating to Northern Ireland might not normally have.
2. While there is no evidence yet of a serious breaking of ranks among Conservative backbenchers, (and reports from Embassy London strongly suggest there will not be), there have been sufficient public rumblings from a number of them - e.g. Richard Shepherd, Jonathan Aitken etc. - to make clear that the issue is by no means going to be an exclusively Opposition 'runner' in the Commons. The latter have, of course, been scathing in their criticism of the Government's handling of the affair and the intensity with which the matter was pursued in the Commons yesterday (during Prime Minister's Question Time and during questions on forthcoming business - see report from Embassy London on this brief) strongly suggest that they believe they have in the affair a stick which has definite potential for hurting the Government with.
3. Media coverage continued this week also at a pace which showed no signs of flagging. There were several editorials, all of which reflected a greater or lesser degree of unease about what the Government is doing - or not doing. Even newspapers normally strongly supportive of the Government postulated that at the very least the Government had a case

to answer which so far they had not answered. It is noteworthy also that there appears to be widespread understanding as to why the matter is of such gravity for the Irish Government and the general tone of the coverage would appear to bear out the view of Nick Comfort of the "Daily Telegraph" (see report from Embassy London on this brief) that the Irish Government had been "most sensible" in their handling of the affair, "far more than the British". Accordingly there has been little or no evidence of the impatience sometimes displayed by the British media in the face of an Irish Government stance conflicting with that of the British Government. This, of course, again reflects the point made above that this issue is one with deep implications domestically for Britain, i.e. beyond its impact on Anglo-Irish relations, which is being recognised as extremely serious in its own right. Margaret van Hattem's article in yesterday's "Financial Times" was a *good* reflection of the former angle. She argued that the AG's announcement had "done little to increase respect for British law, its application or enforcement". To opt for pragmatism in a serious case such as this, as the Government had done, and leave the matter to an internal disciplinary procedure was "a devastating vote of no confidence in the courts, in the police and in the Government itself". It is this kind of argument, allied to serious questions about the nature of the public interest, national security etc. which have given the Stalker story such a unique dynamic in Britain.

4. Meanwhile, it is clear that interest in the affair among the general public remains high also, as the significantly increased sales of the "Daily Express" (which has been serialising the Stalker book) testifies to. It is also reflected in the extensive number of letters on the issue appearing in the letters pages of the papers. Public interest has, of course, undoubtedly been heightened by the "human interest" angle personified by John Stalker and his "adventures" in Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, it is clear

that there is widespread and genuine public concern about the issues involved and their implications for the nature of society in Britain.

5. Viewed against the light of such a sustained and broadly-based level of public interest and concern, it was not, therefore, a week to bring much comfort to British Government hopes - if media speculation in this regard is correct - that with time the issue will somehow "go away".



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