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11 May, 1988

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

Dear Assistant Secretary

British media pressure for a tougher security policy in Northern Ireland

In recent weeks a number of right-wing commentators in the British media have been pressing the view that the British Government's current security policies in Northern Ireland are ineffective and that a considerably tougher approach, including the possible reintroduction of internment, is called for. This view acquired added momentum after the killing of the two soldiers in West Belfast. It has surfaced again in the past fortnight following the killing of the three RAF members in the Netherlands. There is, of course, nothing particularly new in calls for the reintroduction of internment: this has been a regular feature of right-wing media reaction to IRA atrocities in the past. However, bearing in mind the case made for internment in a lecture by Conor Cruise O'Brien which the Friends of the Union organised here on 19 January last, it seems likely that the Friends of the Union are, to one degree or another, behind the current efforts to revive such thinking.

In the wake of the Gibraltar killings, Peregrine Worsthorne in the Sunday Telegraph set the tone with a vigorous defence of the use of extreme methods by the security forces in dealing with terrorism. He commented in a leader that the primary aim should be not to bring terrorists to justice but to "prevent them from winning." He contended that this aim justified a degree of ruthlessness well beyond normal police methods and he suggested that many innocent lives might well have been lost in Northern Ireland in the past because of "quite excessive restraints" imposed on the security forces. Sir Phillip Goodhart, MP, writing in the same newspaper, urged governments not to "shackle the hands" of the security specialists who were trying to protect society.

A week later, on the day after the West Belfast killings, Worsthorne returned to the fray with a leader which called for the immediate "rounding-up" of those responsible. Two days later, T. E. Utley in the Times raised the internment issue. Noting that certain desirable actions become politically possible only when public opinion has been sufficiently shocked by a horrific event, he called for a radical revision of British security policy in Northern Ireland. Describing internment as "the simplest and most direct weapon against the IRA", he cited, and then dismissed, the two main objections to it: first, that it has been tried and failed (it was never tried long enough, with enough determination or with enough intelligence back-up); and second, that it would not work unless introduced simultaneously in the Republic (better to have it without the Republic than to go on not having it at all).

A few days later, the Spectator echoed Utley's points. In the Irish Times on 7 April, Utley argued that the reintroduction of internment in the Republic would improve the Dublin Government's standing in Britain. He held that a British Government policy of 'going it alone' in Northern Ireland, without regard to the future of the Agreement or to world opinion, would command widespread popular support. However, although (as he claimed) a substantial number of Tory backbenchers favoured it, the Government was unlikely to opt for a draconian security policy at present.

Reporting on Mrs. Thatcher's Commons response to the Taoiseach's New York speech (26 April), John Cole, the BBC's political correspondent, said that internment was under discussion again but that this was not a serious option unless the Irish Government agreed to introduce it simultaneously (which was unlikely). He repeated this in a report following the Conference meeting on 4 May. In a private conversation on 28 April, he suggested that internment ought to be easier now as better intelligence was available on the principal targets. He contended that only a tough law-and-order policy could defeat the IRA and was scathing about the admission by Sir James Glover in a Panorama programme last February that there could be no military solution ("he should have been court-martialled for that").

In a contribution to the Times on 3 May (a few days after the Netherlands killings), Conor Cruise O'Brien called for internment in the event of a further deterioration in the security situation. He predicted that, if introduced now, internment would be more successful than it had been in the early seventies. Ideally, it should be introduced south of the border as well. However, "while the present mood in the Republic lasts", he saw no prospect of its early introduction there. Writing in the Daily Telegraph on the same day, John Keegan (the paper's defence correspondent) included internment among a list of military measures needed to defeat the IRA and urged its simultaneous introduction south of the border.

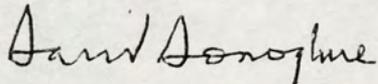
In last Sunday's Sunday Times, Brian Walden called for internment, claiming that the removal of the IRA's "hard core" from circulation would greatly reduce the organisation's effectiveness and that, compared with the rights of ordinary people, the possible propaganda victory for the IRA was of secondary importance. Peregrine Worsthorne regaled Sunday Telegraph

readers with a leader which proposed the reintroduction of the concept of 'outlawry' in order to liberate the security forces from the restraints of which he had complained earlier.

At a public meeting in London last night, Worsthorne's deputy, Bruce Anderson, held that the old Stormont regime "botched" internment in the early seventies (by introducing it prematurely and by getting the wrong people) but that a much better case could be made for it now.

It is worth pointing out, in conclusion, that this recent kite-flying about internment and a tougher security policy has been confined to a narrow circle of right-wing commentators and has found no resonance in the mainstream British media. Most sensible commentators react with scepticism at this stage to any suggestion that the Northern Ireland problem is purely a security problem which can be dealt with by tough security action. Leaders in the Times and Independent last week brusquely dismissed the 'get tough' approach and columnists such as Hugo Young and Peter Jenkins have also underlined the risks inherent in this approach.

Yours sincerely



David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer