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THE TAOISEACH'S MEETING WITH AMBASSADOR FENN - SOME
COMMENTS

1. I would suggest that it is important first to disentangle whatever views we may have of Fenn himself from the underlying situation to which he wants to direct attention. What matters is not the messenger but the message.

AMBASSADOR FENN

2. There has been criticism, privately, in Government circles in Dublin of Fenn and his activities as Ambassador here. My own view is that he is indeed somewhat over-eager and brash but that he is essentially an intelligent, ambitious, professional. He probably has no deep feeling about Anglo-Irish relations as such - but, as an ambitious professional, charged at present with a particular responsibility in regard to that relationship, he would not want it to deteriorate. I believe that he has been reporting professionally, largely accurately and maybe even courageously, to London on views in Dublin while also actively promoting London's views and policies here (sometimes too eagerly from a Dublin viewpoint).

FENN'S MESSAGE

3. In any case, whatever we feel about Fenn, I would think it important not to let that obscure the message he may now have to convey. The message seems likely to be that in the highest circles of the British Government, there is now a very serious distrust developing of the view and attitude of the Irish Government - to a degree which could seriously affect Anglo-Irish relations.

VIEW OF OUR OWN AMBASSADOR

4. I have talked privately with our own Ambassador Andy O'Rourke, since I spoke with Fenn, to see how far what he hears from his contacts would bear out the idea of a serious crisis of confidence in London at present. He first expressed some puzzlement, since recent contacts with Sir Geoffrey Howe, with a Foreign Office Minister (Lynda Chalker) with the Cabinet Secretary (Butler), and with the Permanent Secretary at NIO (Blelloch) gave him no

particular sense of crisis. On consideration however, he did note that some of the concerns attributed to Mrs. Thatcher, had been echoed - though in a less acute form - by some of those to whom he has spoken.

HOW DOES MRS. THATCHER SEE IT ?

5. Without, I hope, being misunderstood as endorsing what follows, I would venture to suggest the following as an outline of Mrs. Thatcher's own concern, as the Ambassador will present it to the Taoiseach.

6. Mrs. Thatcher believes that she committed herself and her Government to an unprecedented involvement of the Irish Government in the affairs of Northern Ireland, on the clear understanding that both Governments shared a whole-hearted commitment to act together against terrorism. This concerted action was to take two main forms:-

(a) changes within Northern Ireland, (where the Irish Government would act as surrogate for the concerns of the minority while efforts were made to achieve devolved government). This would "dry up" the pool of support for terrorism" and thus reduce violence;

and

(b) whole-hearted direct cooperation between the two Governments and their security forces against a terrorist attack which menaces both.

7. Mrs. Thatcher believes that she has remained steadfast in holding to this agreement despite solid opposition from the Unionists. But she would say that she has gained nothing. On the one hand, she seems to have alienated the majority in Northern Ireland without winning over the minority or reducing violence; on the other hand, she has now begun seriously to doubt that she can count on full commitment from the Irish Government either on certain important aspects of the Agreement itself or on whole-hearted cooperation between the respective security forces.

8. As to the Agreement, Mrs. Thatcher apparently complains that the Irish Government seem to want to "dine a la carte". She would say that in several speeches over the past few months, the Taoiseach has shown that (i) while he does not oppose devolution, he certainly does not give full assent to the statement about it in Art. 4 ("the Irish Government support that policy"); and (ii) contrary to Art. 1 (1), he believes that the issue of the future of Northern Ireland is one to be determined by the majority on the island rather than by a majority in Northern Ireland.

9. As to cooperation against terrorism, Mrs. Thatcher would say that, as she sees it, even though some things

have been achieved, it is still less than enthusiastic on the Irish side and there is a tendency to haggle over details rather than focus on the common objective.

10. Mrs. Thatcher also appears to be still exercised about what she sees as very limited references to violence in the Taoiseach's four speeches in the USA. He put it forcefully to Fenn on his return, that it would have been wrong and counter-productive to lecture his US audience, who would not support terrorism in any case. But her complaint is that, wherever they were made, the four speeches constituted a major statement of policy on Northern Ireland; and the virtual omission of a strong statement on violence from such a statement created serious misunderstanding.

SUMMARY OF MRS. THATCHER'S VIEWS

11. In brief, it seems likely that Fenn's presentation of Mrs. Thatcher's concern will focus on four main points:

(a) Security cooperation - less than whole-hearted, with a tendency to find reasons not to do things rather than ways to do them ?

(b) Attitude to violence - absence of substantial reference in US speeches leaves room for misunderstanding in Northern Ireland and elsewhere ?

(c) Devolution - how far does the Taoiseach really want to see it happen (Art. 4 of the Agreement), granted that he is under no obligation to put forward proposals ?

(d) Determination of the future of Northern Ireland Will the Taoiseach continue to take the position publicly that the future of Northern Ireland is dependent on the views of a majority on the island, as distinct from the views of a majority within Northern Ireland, (Art. 1 (1) of the Agreement) ?

ARGUMENTS ALREADY PUT TO FENN

12. In case of misunderstanding, I should add that I have argued very strongly and in detail, with Fenn, both before and after his visit to London, against all these criticisms. (He said that he found this helpful when he was pressed on these issues by Mrs. Thatcher). I stressed how much has been done in security cooperation; how strong the whole stance of the Government has been against violence; and how politically short-sighted it is to complain of "dining a la carte" instead of giving the present Irish

Government, which came to the table after the menu had been selected, full credit for keeping to it so well.

DOES MRS. THATCHER'S ATTITUDE MATTER GREATLY ?

13. If indeed it proves to be the case that there is something of a "crisis of confidence" on the part of Mrs. Thatcher at present, as Ambassador Fenn may well indicate at his meeting with the Taoiseach, it must be asked how far this really matters ? Mrs. Thatcher, after all, is to a large extent, "locked into" the Agreement internationally; we would argue that "delivery" on the agenda established by the Agreement is already meagre; and new possibilities appear to be opening up of a serious North/South dialogue between the Government and the Unionists. It may be this latter, rather than "delivery" on the agenda set by the Agreement which will prove eventually to be the real, historic, effect of the Agreement.

14. As against this, it can also be argued that it was the pressures created by the Agreement which led the Unionists to consider a possible dialogue with Dublin; and that these pressures could dissipate if Dublin and London fall out publicly to such a degree that the Agreement ceases to be credible in its own terms as a cooperative working relationship between the two Governments. There is also the point, in looking to a possible dialogue with the Unionists (as partly compensating for deteriorating relations with London), that Dublin would have more to lose since even an unsuccessful dialogue could achieve much of the Unionist aims by helping to erode the credibility of the present Agreement. It is a matter for policy consideration, what weight to give to these different considerations.

15. It is, of course, obviously right and important that the Taoiseach and the Government should not feel in any way in awe of Mrs. Thatcher; and no doubt, if Ambassador Fenn reports, as he may, that there is a "crisis of confidence" on Mrs. Thatcher's part at present, the Taoiseach may well have something quite as strong to say on his side about the sequence of events which began with the handling of the Stalker/Sampson report.

CONCLUSION

16. Having said this however, it appears that the issue comes down to the desirability of a good relationship with Mrs. Thatcher - and what would have to be done to maintain it. The Taoiseach will wish to consider how far whatever policy approach he may wish to take to the problem of Northern Ireland over the next year or two, may depend on, or would benefit from, the maintenance of a good working relationship with her - granted that she seems likely to remain in office over that period; or how far, on the

contrary, it can be pursued independently of such a relationship.

17. Finally, whatever the logic of the points at issue between Dublin and London it would be well to allow, in any dealings with Mrs. Thatcher, for a very strong (and understandable) emotional component on her side insofar as the security issue is concerned. Apart from a general tendency to self-righteousness on any issue of this kind, there is the fact that the IRA are a constant direct threat to her own personal security; they have killed a close adviser (Airey Neave) within the precincts of the House of Commons; and they have bombed her annual Party Conference and killed or maimed some of her political friends and Ministers in her Government. This is not a reason to accept Mrs. Thatcher's positions uncritically but it would be well to allow for it in dealing with her.

ND
21 May 1988