

Hallett

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10/2/92

FROM: J McKervill  
DATE: 14 July 1992

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10 JUL 1992  
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cc: Mr Thomas - B  
Mr Bell - B  
Mr Alston - B  
Mr D J R Hill - B  
Mr Cooke - B

cc PS/PUS (L&B)  
PS/Mr Fell  
P N Bell 14/7.

Talks

Mr G R Archer  
RID  
FCO

in the Mac...  
Mr Mac...

OPINION POLL ON ARTICLES 2 AND 3: MEDIA REPORTS ON THE TALKS  
PROCESS, WEEKEND OF 11-12 JULY

1. An opinion poll published in the Sunday Independent on 12 July suggested a drop in support for amendment of Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution compared with a year ago. Only 40% supported amendment compared with 48% in June 1991. 31% said they should be left as they are (33% in 1991) and 29% did not know. The corresponding undecided figure in June 1991 was 19%. In other words, some of those who supported amendment last year have moved into the 'dont know' category.

2. 38% of Fianna Fail voters were in favour of amendment against 36% for no change. 53% of Progressive Democrat and 45% of Fine Gael voters favoured amendment.

3. The poll results are being interpreted as showing that consensus for amendment of the Articles can no longer be seen as a foregone conclusion. The Sunday Independent editorial suggests that the result puts the success of a referendum in some doubt and that it cannot help the Government's own negotiating position in the talks, if the public's willingness to ratify any change agreed, is seen to be in question. But, it says, public opinion responds best to a lead set from the top and the Government's failure to provide clear thinking on this issue may help explain why nearly one in three are now undecided. "Political sources" in the Irish Independent of 13 July are reported as believing that once a debate commenced on the political future of the island, there would be wide support for amendment.

4. The Taoiseach told the Ambassador on 12 June that the results perhaps reflected the fact that Irish people are only now thinking about the question and what a change would actually mean, thus the significant rise in the "undecided figure". Andrews, on the other hand, suggested to the Ambassador that the drop in support for amendment perhaps reflected annoyance at recent Unionist pressure to get rid of the Articles.

COMMENT

5. There is always danger in reading too much into isolated opinion polls. Perhaps the Taoiseach's and Andrews' interpretations, both of which seem reasonable, are as far as we can safely go on this

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particular poll. The Sunday Independent editorial however touched on the main issue: that is that a lead by the Government - and cross party support for the Government's stance - will be a crucial factor in any future referendum on Articles 2 and 3.

Media Reports on the Talks on Northern Ireland, Weekend of 12-13 July

6. Press reports over the weekend had already discounted the fact, that for the first time for 70 years, the Northern Ireland constitutional parties and the Government of the Republic had had three days of exchanges without falling out. Reports focussed on alleged SDLP unhappiness with the way the talks were going, because they found it more difficult to work with Sir Patrick Mayhew than Mr Brooke, and because of perceived divisions between themselves and the Irish Government.

7. The Sunday Tribune correspondent in Belfast claimed that the Tanaiste had been included in the Irish Government team at the request of the SDLP because they wanted the Irish team beefed up - an implicit criticism, the correspondent noted, of Mr Andrews (and the first that we can recall that has appeared in the press). Curiously in the same paper an article, consisting largely of transcripts of Mr Wilson's exchanges with Unionist representatives in Northern Ireland Forum in 1983, purported to show that he had deliberately under-played support for the Union in Northern Ireland.

8. The PDs also received coverage. They were reported as having no disagreement with Reynolds' approach so far to the talks. Michael McDowell, Chairman of the Party, argued against Articles 2 and 3 in the Sunday Independent. He said that although Article 3 established a claim over Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland people had not been asked about it and only 38% of the Irish Free State electorate had voted for it. He claimed that Article 3 was not just a claim to govern Northern Ireland, but to do so in conformity with the 1937 Constitution.

9. In the course of an interview on RTE on 12 July Spring (leader, Labour Party) welcomed the fact that Articles 2 and 3 were on the table, but said they needed to be seen in the context of a new North-South relationship, which might even make them unnecessary. He carefully declined to state his own view on the Articles. But he defined success in the talks as being achieved if they brought about a new working relationship between Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland.

10. Speaking on the same programme in the course of an interview, Finance Minister Aherne said that Articles 2 and 3 would be subject to a referendum as part of a package on the totality of relationships.

11. Also on the same programme, Fine Gael MEP John Cusnahan said the talks should keep going through the summer, in order to build up momentum. He also proposed the establishment of a committee of MEPs from Ireland who would be able to discuss Northern Ireland. (Perhaps this is intended to get Mr Hume off the hook of his EC Commissioner proposal.)

(Signed) -  
J McKervill

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