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Reference Code: 2019/101/2257

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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT

BÉAL FEIRSTE

BELFAST

PO 11/12

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CONF. SA/206

29 November 1989

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

Mr. O'Leary,
To see + p. 11/12

AA 6/12

Current Political Situation

Dear Assistant Secretary

The following brief update on the current political situation is based on conversations with the British Joint Secretary and with a Northern Ireland journalist who contacts me occasionally (the latter - strongly nationalist in his own views - maintains good contact with the Unionist leadership).

Unionists' contact with Irish Government

The Official Unionists gave a press reception in the past two days at which they were anxious to let it be known, in a low key way, that they had made discreet contact with Dublin in relation to economic issues by means of faxing to Dublin a copy of a speech by Roy Beggs M.P. in the House of Commons on the occasion of the Queen's speech at the official opening of Parliament last week (I presume this is, in fact, the text copied to Mr. Gallagher last week). While Molyneaux was not present at the reception, the OUP were anxious to let it be known that he had personally approved, and was behind, the contact.

Unionist contacts were also anxious to make it known that they would be talking to Irish Government Ministers during the Presidency, though stressing that they would not talk about "constitutional issues such as devolution". One Unionist contact remarked to a journalist, however, "you'd never know what could be done over a cup of tea in Strasbourg or Luxembourg".

My journalist contact remarked, a propos of nothing in particular, that Molyneaux was a "stickler for protocol and procedure" and expected those who dealt with him to obey it as he does in all his dealings.

Unionists Generally

The OUP are optimistic about the possibilities for political progress in 1990 and seem to feel that they can get sufficient political concessions to enable them to talk. They seemed confident, my interlocutor said, that a suspension of the meetings of the Intergovernmental Conference was on the cards.

I asked the British Joint Secretary (who, as you know, is also the Head of the Political Affairs Bureau at Stormont) if the Secretary of State's remarks yesterday (widely reported in today's papers) about his desire to have regular meetings of the Intergovernmental Conference were, by any chance, designed to curtail Unionist optimism in regard to a hiatus in Conference meetings. He replied that he did not think so. The remarks were simply a reflection of the Secretary of State's tendency to say what he thinks - the matter was in his mind since he was conscious of the desirability, in view of our EC Presidency, to map out a programme of dates for meetings of the Conference in the first half of 1990.

The British Joint Secretary went on to express some personal scepticism about suspension of the Conference meetings as a means of providing a window for talks, though, he hastened to add, this was not the view of a majority of his colleagues. He thought that, while there was some pressure for political progress from the grass roots of Unionism, it was not sufficient, from the leadership's point of view, to outweigh the risk of taking an "up-front position". In the general political framework, there was a lack of pressure on most of the parties to do anything positive. He did not expand on this except to say that, while all the parties found the present situation unsatisfactory, it was not uncomfortable enough for any of them to spur them to creative thinking about the political future.

My journalistic interlocutor confirmed the above except to add that, possibly and ironically, the DUP might be less comfortable living with the present situation. The OUP was probably happy enough with the present situation which some of them see as "creeping integration". The SDLP were happy enough to have the Anglo-Irish Agreement in place and go on with the present situation in the absence of any indication that Mr. Hume's proposals for wider dialogue are acceptable to Unionists. The DUP, on the other hand, needed some kind of progress if they were not to become completely enveloped in "negative, we'll oppose anything" politics.

The Official Unionists have wanted to be rid of the Anti-Agreement Pact with the DUP for some time. It has fettered them and, indeed, has done little for the DUP except to oblige them not to contest Westminster seats against the Official Unionists. The DUP is rather frustrated at present and a little directionless. The instinct of many will be to go back to "religion and bible thumping". According to my

journalistic contact, this is bad news for Peter Robinson, whose chances of the leadership were always rather slim. He is deeply suspect to the "Free PS" (the Free Presbyterians) - he is not from the Presbyterian community. There is a better than 50/50 chance that a directionless DUP will look to William McCrea, rather than to Robinson, as Paisley's successor.

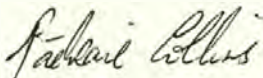
The OUP boycott of Stormont Ministers is now effectively over - the British Joint Secretary confirmed this view. My journalistic contact thought that John Taylor's recent public profile was to be accounted for by the fact, apart from his general ambition to be leader, that he saw Martin Smyth as having "inflicted a nasty wound to his own foot" following the dismal showing at the recent protest on the 4th Anniversary of the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Smyth, he said, was being "hung out to dry" by all the influential leaders of the OUP. He had now confirmed what most observers knew for some time, namely, that "he was none too bright and lacked judgement".

The Secretary of State's Problems

Secretary of State Brooke is, according to my journalistic contact, under severe pressure from the press and elsewhere following his remarks that the IRA could not be defeated militarily. Brooke has, he said, had the most gruelling introduction of any Secretary of State to Northern Ireland. He came in for the "most awful mawling I have ever seen visited on a politician in twenty years reporting on Northern Ireland" at the Press Conference following the meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference in Dublin on 15 September.

Brooke, according to my interlocutor, is showing the pressure and, while more comfortable in private press briefings, has descended into incoherence at several recent meetings with the press. Nevertheless, the overall impression the press have is of an intelligent man with an ability to abstract, reflect and take a longer view.

Yours sincerely



Padraic Collins