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cc Pugh
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29 September 1989

Mr Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division

Dear Assistant Secretary

The outlook for this year's Tory party conference

I met Jonathan Caine of the Conservative Party's Central Office yesterday to discuss the prospects for this year's party conference (which opens in Blackpool on 9 October).

Caine, who deals with Irish affairs in Central Office, told me that a decision to recognise the North Down Conservative Association is now a foregone conclusion. Both the Government and Central Office continue to have reservations about the move but a remarkable level of support for it has been generated at grass-roots level in the party and the Tory leadership has accordingly, decided to bow to the inevitable.

Caine and others in Central Office expected the initiative to fizzle out following Laurence Kennedy's uninspiring performance in the European Parliament elections. However, Kennedy claimed credit with senior Conservatives for having performed almost as well as the Alliance candidate and for having built up the largest party organisation in North Down. His strongest card was the continuing perception at grass-roots level - on the part of people who, Caine observed know nothing about Northern Ireland and rarely give the problem a moment's thought - that anyone in NI who wants to be a Conservative, and behaves like one, should be given the opportunity to become one. This sentiment enabled Kennedy to drum up no less than 59 motions on the subject for this year's Conference.

Faced with this flood of motions (unequelled for a NI topic since the early seventies), the party leadership felt it had no choice but to grant a debate. A fifty-minute debate has been scheduled for the afternoon session on 10 October. In order to emphasize that this is a party matter from which HMG is standing back to some extent, no Ministers will speak and indeed Peter Brooke may choose to absent himself from the platform while the debate is in progress. Ian Gow is likely to be the most senior Tory speaking in favour. The motion will be put to a vote and is expected to be adopted by an overwhelming majority. Sir Peter Lane, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the National Union of Conservatives, will then respond, noting the outcome and undertaking to recommend to the NUC, at its November meeting, that North Down's request for affiliation be granted. Only North Down will be admitted this year, however. Lane will indicate that, while North Down has satisfied the criteria regarding membership and organisation, the other applicants have yet to come up to the mark.

Central Office privately considers the East Belfast and South Belfast branches to be on a par with North Down - and all three to be a cut above the branches in Lagan Valley and East Londonderry, which are suffering from poor chairmanship. (There was for example astonishment at the political naivete of the East Londonderry Chairman, who revealed to the press that only 21 people had turned up to hear Richard Needham). The Central Office view, however, is that the initiative should not receive too much encouragement and that the other branches should be kept waiting for another year or two.

Caine rehearsed the basis objections which he and his colleagues have:

- the North Down Conservatives have made clear that they are vehemently opposed to HMG's policy on devolution;
- if not openly hostile to the Agreement, they are certainly not enthusiastic about it (Kennedy indicated to Caine that he regards it as an unpleasant reality with which he has to live);
- their vote-splitting effect within the Unionist camp will offend the Unionists, with whom HMG is anxious to repair relations.

He personally regards as futile any effort to change the traditional battle-lines in NI politics. Whether he likes it or not, Kennedy will find himself being questioned about his views on the Union and, as a practising politician, he cannot duck these questions. Furthermore, any reticence or ambivalence on his part will be seized on by his Unionist rivals, who will present themselves as much tougher defenders of traditional Unionist values.

I agreed with Caine. I also went on to note the numerous contradictions between the position taken by the British Government, and the commitments it entered into, in the Anglo-Irish Agreement and a decision by the Conservative Party in favour of the North Down Conservatives.

Caine made clear his own hope that nothing will come of the move. While Kennedy's position in North Down may be enhanced if Jim Kilfedder decides not to contest the next election, the Official Unionists may be expected to mount a strong campaign against him and elsewhere the Conservatives have, in his view, "nil prospects".

He mentioned that as Party Chairman, Peter Brooke expressed no strong views within Central Office on the subject. He indicated that he saw merit on both sides of the argument. While in theory he or the Prime Minister could intervene between Conference and the NUC meeting in order to block the decisions, in practice they will not. With many other internal difficulties facing her, the Prime Minister does not want a confrontation with grass-roots Conservatives over this issue.

This will be the only NI issue to be debated at the Conference. To accompany it, the North Down Conservatives will be holding two fringe meetings (one before and one after the vote). Other fringe meetings at the Conference will be addressed by Enoch Powell and Jim Molyneux and a Friends of the Union meeting is also planned.

Yours sincerely

Donoghue

// David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer