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Reference Code:	2019/101/2368
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16 October, 1989

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

Dear Assistant Secretary

Private comments on the North Down decision

In the course of various conversations at the Conservative Party Conference in Blackpool last week, the Ambassador, Mr. Hayes and I gathered a wide range of comments on the decision in favour of the North Down Conservatives, of which the following were the most significant.

(1) Peter Brooke

- In a conversation with the undersigned, Brooke described the arguments for and against recognition of the North Down branch as a balance-sheet of assets and liabilities. The only problem, however, was that "almost all of the liabilities are on the Government's side".
- He did not believe that there was as much enthusiasm for the issue at grass-roots level as people had been claiming. Tuesday's debate had given a distinctly misleading impression. He mentioned that his absence from the platform had been quite deliberate - the National Union had decided that it would be convenient if he were to be "having a long lunch somewhere".
- We were joined briefly by Laurence Kennedy, with whom, however, the Secretary of State did not speak. In a gesture more eloquent than words, Brooke rolled his eyes upwards as Kennedy departed.
- Earlier in the week, Brooke commented privately to a journalist, who asked him about the decision, that "nothing is going to happen on this for a long time".

(2) John Cope

- Cope told the Ambassador that the party had not encouraged the North Down Conservatives but that, with the strength of feeling generated by the campaign, it now had no option but to recognise them.
- Observing that Laurence Kennedy was opposed to the Agreement but that the Agreement was Government and party policy, Cope speculated that Kennedy would begin to tone down his public hostility towards the Agreement.
- There were indications that Cope and Mawhinney may be more sympathetic to the North Down cause than Brooke. Although they were seated not on the platform but in the body of the hall during Tuesday's debate, they attended a celebratory function hosted by the North Down Conservatives on Wednesday. Needham's support for the initiative is, of course, already known.

(3) Sir Geoffrey Howe

- In a conversation with Mr. Hayes and myself, Sir Geoffrey Howe indicated some unhappiness with the decision. He saw a distinct possibility that it may introduce sectarianism "by the back door" into the Conservative Party, a party which has consistently tried to be non-sectarian in relation to NI. The hostility displayed by Laurence Kennedy and his supporters towards the Agreement clearly bothered him. He implied strongly that this was a party decision which the Government did not welcome.

(4) William Whitelaw

- In a private comment which gradually found its way around the Conference, Whitelaw said to Nicholas Scott after the debate: "Wait until they discover in the next election that they have polled fewer votes than Sinn Fein!".

(5) Sir Peter Lane

- In conversation with Mr. Hayes and myself, Sir Peter Lane, Chairman of the National Union of Conservatives, took credit for having stalled for no less than fifteen months on the decision. Bowing to the inevitable, he had decided that the request should be granted with as much grace and good humour as possible - hence his brief, but positive, statement on Monday promising to recommend recognition of North Down at the next NUC meeting.
- The formal decision to this effect will go through automatically at a meeting next month. However, the processing of applications from other branches in NI (some of which have already been received) will be a long-drawn-out process. Lane predicted that no more than 4-5 branches in all would be recognised.
- As for Government support during campaigns, he expected that this would be left to the Secretary of State and his Ministers (as others would be reluctant to travel for security reasons). When we

pointed to dilemmas in which Government Ministers could find themselves, Lane agreed wholeheartedly and warned that, if Laurence Kennedy did not wish to "negate the gains he has made this week", he would have to keep his personal views on the Agreement firmly under wraps.

- Lane was uncomfortably aware of the embarrassment which the decision would cause for the Government. He was also certain, however, that no Conservative candidate stood a chance of winning a Westminster seat in NI.

(6) Jonathan Caine (Conservative Central Office)

- Caine, the Central Office official with responsibility for NI, told Mr. Hayes and myself that there had been a discreet indication from the Prime Minister that, while she would have preferred to try to restore the old Conservative/Unionist alliance, she had no strong objection to the move. This had cleared the way for the decision.
- Chris Patten had indicated a willingness to go to NI to speak on behalf of the North Down Conservatives.
- The Government would, however, in general seek to drag its feet and to distance itself from the NI Conservatives. The NUC had deliberately kept Ian Gow off the list of speakers in the debate lest he try to claim an anti-Agreement victory. Caine speculated that the Government might try to find ways of publicly re-emphasising its commitment to the Agreement over the coming months in order to dispel any possible doubts to which the decision might give rise.
- Caine later indicated to journalists that there was serious concern at a senior level in the party about possible adverse repercussions from Dublin over the move.

(7) Nicholas Scott MP

- Scott told Mr. Hayes and myself that his presence on the platform during the debate was of no significance. He had been asked by the Chief Whip to sit there in order to fill an unexpected gap.
- He was clearly very sceptical about the decision. The British Government's role in NI, as he saw it, should be that of a referee. This was brought out clearly in Article 1 of the Agreement. The flaw in the North Down decision was that "you cannot be referee and player at the same time".
- The decision would also seriously undermine the Government's efforts to rebuild bridges to the Unionists.
- He expected several other branches to be recognised in due course. His own assessment, however, was that Conservatives had no hope of election anywhere in NI. The best they could hope for was to retain their deposits in North Down and East Belfast.
- He could not conceive of Ministers campaigning on behalf of Conservative candidates in NI. It would clearly be impossible for members of the Government to seek support for people who were opposed to HMG's policies.

(8) Bill Cash MP

- In conversation with Mr. Hayes and myself, Cash observed that, while this might seem a very natural and logical step for the party to take, party grass-roots might think differently when they saw Conservative candidates being annihilated by the DUP and OUP.
- Part of the Government's unhappiness with the decision, he suggested, was that it might annoy the Irish Government.

(9) Michael Mates MP

- In conversation with Mr. Hayes and myself, Mates speculated that the party leadership would try to temporize on this issue until the next election. The brevity of the response given by the Chairman of the National Union, and the absence of any relevant Ministers from the platform, were significant.
- Mates had the same reservation about the decision as Nick Scott. The Government had tried to "play fair" towards both communities in NI (the example he offered being the action it took against Lisburn UDC for failing to collect bins in Twinbrook). This decision placed it firmly on the Unionist side of the equation - "as if the NI problem is not already complex enough".

(10) Laurence Kennedy

- In conversation with the Ambassador, Kennedy left no doubt about his opposition to the Agreement. He claimed, however, that in the local election campaign the Agreement had not been an issue on the doorsteps and that during the EP campaign it had been raised with him only once.
- In a later conversation with Mr. Hayes and myself, Kennedy hoped that the Irish Government would not react too negatively about the decision: if Dublin was serious about wanting peace and reconciliation in NI, it should welcome a move which "gives the NI people their political self-respect."

(11) Enoch Powell

- Asked at a Monday Club fringe meeting about the decision, Powell welcomed it and hoped that it presaged a move to total integration between NI and the rest of the UK.

(12) Willie Ross and Jack Allen

- In conversations with Mr. Hayes and myself at another Monday Club fringe meeting, Willie Ross (MP for East Derry) and Jack Allen (Chairman of the OUP) reacted with equanimity to the decision. They were glad that "the gloves were now off" and relished the first electoral contest with the North Down Conservatives. Their first

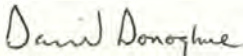
question to them would be: "We know where you stand on the Agreement - but where do you stand on at other HMG policies"? The support which the Conservatives would have to voice for the Government's economic and social policies, which are deeply unpopular in NI, should put an end to their challenge.

- They predicted that Jim Kilfedder would stand again in North Down and that this campaign would be heavily endorsed by the two Unionist leaders, in order to frustrate the Conservatives. While there might be some slight risk to individual MPs elsewhere (e.g. Roy Beggs in East Antrim), on the whole they saw no likelihood of the Conservatives winning any Westminster seats.

(13) Media contacts

- Finally, various media contacts expressed the view that Central Office and the Government would do all possible to drag their feet in relation to NI Conservatives. New applications would be processed very slowly and financial and campaigning support for North Down would be minimal.

Yours sincerely



David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer