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cc Mr. Nathan; All
Gareth A1
Rox.

19 December 1989

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division

Dear Assistant Secretary

Lunch with Jonathan Caine, Conservative Central Office

Caine is the Northern Ireland desk officer in Conservative Central Office.

The following were the principal points of interest which arose:

Brooke's remarks

- On the day on which Brooke's remarks became public, there was "consternation" in No. 10 (where Caine is on temporary secondment). Mark Lennox-Boyd, the Prime Minister's PPS, received bitter complaints from Stanbrook and Gow in the Commons and reported them back. The Prime Minister was, however, unable to intervene in the matter as she was completely preoccupied that afternoon with the finalisation of a speech for the UN.
- In a conversation with Caine and another official in Downing Street on the previous day, Brooke said that, in interviews given to mark his first hundred days in office, he had indicated that the British Government would talk to Sinn Féin in the aftermath of a ceasefire. While dubious about the propriety of interviews to mark one's first hundred days in office (which, to Caine, smacked too much of the colonial Governor reflecting on the natives), Caine and his colleague saw no great problem with what Brooke had said. Similar hints had, after all, been dropped by the British Government from time to time in relation to insurgent groups in Southern Africa. What Downing Street had not expected, however, were the terms in which Brooke conveyed his point. They found his choice of the word "imaginative" (to characterise the British Government's response to a ceasefire) unfortunate. They also had difficulties with his Cyprus analogy.

- In Caine's view, however, the affair is unlikely to cause Brooke any lasting political damage. He caused offence to the Unionists, with whom he was trying to mend bridges, and he also upset "the likes of Gow and Stanbrook", but there are no indications of serious Prime Ministerial displeasure.

Unionists

- Judging from their recent party conference (which Caine attended), the Official Unionists are in a difficult frame of mind at present. They feel betrayed by the Conservative Party's decision to organise in NI which, they believe, will reduce them to the status of the DUP. While initially defiant and self-confident, they were badly shaken by the Castlereagh election result. John Taylor, who devoted much effort to the Official Unionist campaign there, was taken aback by the Conservative candidate's success in a constituency traditionally viewed as a DUP stronghold. It did not augur well for a Westminster election. Martin Smyth is particularly worried about his own position in South Belfast where, he believes, a strong Conservative candidate could unseat him.

NI Conservatives

- Caine observed that, as the next election approaches, the Government will have to take some hard decisions about its attitude towards the NI Conservatives. To illustrate the dilemma in which it now finds itself, he mentioned that there were hostile reactions from North Down to Sir Geoffrey Howe's public expression of gratitude (in a speech winding up the recent debate on the Queen's Speech) for Jim Kilfedder's decision not to cross the floor. The North Down Conservatives resented the credit given by a very senior Cabinet Minister to a potential electoral rival.
- On the other hand, Caine observed, another Minister - Chris Patten - addressed a meeting of the East Belfast Conservatives last week, drawing an audience of over 200. Patten, who had accepted an invitation to speak in the Knock Methodist Church, decided to combine this with an address to the NI Conservatives (previously promised).
- The letter which pressed Jim Kilfedder not to cross the floor, and which over eighty MPs signed, was not a Central Office initiative. It was prepared by Alan Glyn MP, who has sat beside Kilfedder in the Commons for many years, and some internal evidence (eg the reference to Kilfedder's time as Speaker of the NI Assembly, a detail not widely known) would suggest that Kilfedder had a hand in its drafting. The most senior MPs to sign it were Sir Julian Amery and John Moore (the former Minister).
- The expectation is that Kilfedder will stand in North Down at the next election and that there will also be a DUP candidate. As the DUP supported Kilfedder's campaign last time round, the Unionist vote on the next occasion could be split three ways and a Conservative candidate, as Caine sees it, could "just squeeze in".

- There are, however, moves reportedly underway to have Laurence Kennedy dropped as the prospective candidate in North Down. There is growing dissatisfaction within NI Conservative ranks with Kennedy's abrasive personality and poor political judgement. His policy of open hostility towards the Official Unionists is considered unhelpful and the name of Peter Martin, Chairman of the North Down branch, is emerging as a possible alternative.

Political movement

- Caine's own assessment is that there are virtually no prospects for political movement in NI over the next couple of years. He observed that, within the OUP, integrationism is by no means confined to the leadership. The Young Unionists are strongly integrationist, which suggests that the party's policy will remain unchanged even after Molyneaux's departure.
- Caine was critical of more optimistic assessments by the NIO who, he believes, have very limited contact with Unionists and are inclined to attach undue significance to "a word changed here or there" in a speech by a Unionist politician.

Molyneaux

- Last Thursday, in a conversation with Caine, Molyneaux was optimistic that the Government would shortly end the Order in Council arrangements for NI and replace them with a Grand Committee. While conscious that Molyneaux "has been optimistic about many things before", Caine thought it possible nonetheless that, with a view to appeasing Tory back-benchers who support the Unionists on this, the Government might eventually introduce a Grand Committee for NI. Caine, however, has no evidence that this is currently under consideration.
- Molyneaux also indicated continuing suspicion of John Taylor and a reluctance to hand over the party to him. Caine expects that the OUP leader will delay his retirement until an alternative successor is in sight.

The Taoiseach's initiative

- Finally, Caine commented that the Taoiseach's initiative in extending an invitation to the three NI MEPs for talks was eminently sensible and reasonable, even if the responses by Paisley and Nicholson were predictable. The two Unionists appeared to fear that a wider political significance would be read into any talks with the Taoiseach. It made sense, however, for all possible avenues of practical cooperation between Dublin and the Unionists to be explored.

Yours sincerely

David Donoghue

David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer