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AMBASADÓ NA hÉIREANN, LONDAIN



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26 October 1989

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

Dear Assistant Secretary

Lunch with Richard Norton-Taylor, The Guardian

Norton-Taylor is an experienced political journalist with good connections in Whitehall and the intelligence community.

The following were the main points of interest which arose:

The Guildford and Birmingham cases

- In sheer news terms, the release of the Guildford Four was the most dramatic story Norton-Taylor could recall over the past ten years. Clearly the Government had reached a point where it calculated that the "sudden, surgical move" of withdrawing the charges against the G4 was preferable to the long-drawn-out disclosure of embarrassing material during the appeal hearing. Though he had seen a story in the Sunday Correspondent which suggested that the Home Secretary had been first apprised of developments in a Blackpool hotel room, he was convinced that Douglas Hurd would have been au fait long beforehand with the emerging trend in the Avon and Somerset investigation and that the Blackpool news would have related only to the move planned by the DPP.
- According to senior Home Office contacts, Hurd is extremely worried about the credibility problems posed for police evidence in court hearings as a consequence of the Guildford outcome. He fears that lawyers for the defence will be able to sow doubts in the jurors' minds and that there will be fewer convictions in future.
- Norton-Taylor understands that Hurd also spent a lot of time "agonising" over the Birmingham Six case and the renewed pressure which he knew he would face on that front following the Guildford

decision. He appears to have satisfied himself that, at the present time, no "new and material evidence" has emerged which would justify further reference back to the Court of Appeal.

- Norton-Taylor was not optimistic about the degree to which the May inquiry could stimulate action on the Birmingham case. While in theory May had been given considerable flexibility by the Home Secretary, in practice the inquiry was likely to focus almost exclusively on the Guildford and Maguire cases. Though May had a reasonably independent reputation, he would not have been chosen by Hurd if he seemed likely to try to open up in any detail controversial cases lying outside his immediate brief. The most one could hope for, Norton-Taylor suggested, was a series of observations on the unreliability of uncorroborated confessional evidence.
- I brought Norton-Taylor up to date on the allegations concerning misconduct by the WMSCS and suggested that the Guardian ought to pursue this line of inquiry. Some helpful work in relation to the Birmingham case had already been carried out by David Rose (the paper's crime correspondent). Norton-Taylor undertook to prepare a major feature, probably in conjunction with his colleague David Pallister, which would highlight the original implausibility of the Birmingham Six as IRA activists and would argue that the recent WMSCS allegations, combined with the Guildford outcome, made a review of this case essential.

The Prime Minister

- A senior Whitehall source remarked to Norton-Taylor recently, in the course of a wider conversation, that officials involved with Irish affairs are finding it increasingly difficult to engage the Prime Minister's attention. Memoranda have been sent in on a number of matters, including the current collusion controversy, but they have been received with marked disinterest. They find that "she either switches off" or else reacts in a petulant and dismissive way. This does not deter them, however, from trying to impress on her that the "general problem" of Northern Ireland will not go away and that she has no option but to address it.
- Senior officials are also worried by the Prime Minister's impetuosity and tendency to "go over the top" on other issues. The major issue this week, of course, has been her behaviour at the Commonwealth conference, which placed her new Foreign Secretary in a very difficult position.

Ryan decision

- The reason for the muted Government reactions to this decision, Norton-Taylor commented, was that the Government has known all along that its case against Ryan was not watertight, particularly if certain key witnesses failed to travel to Dublin.

- British intelligence sources told Norton-Taylor last December that the Belgian police had "blown it" by moving in to arrest Ryan before sufficient evidence against him had been obtained.
- Senior FCO and Home Office officials, furthermore, indicated to Norton-Taylor subsequently that they had not been surprised by the Irish ~~decision~~ decision, as they were aware that the evidence presented by the British side was not strong enough.

Yours sincerely

David Donoghue.

David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer