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| Reference Code: | 2019/31/27 |
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AN RÚNAÍOCHT ANGLA-ÉIREANNACH

BÉAL FEIRSTE

ANGLO-IRISH SECRETARIAT

SEENBELFAST

23 February 1989

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

Dear Assistant Secretary

Conversation with Sir John Hermon, Chief Constable, RUC

Sir John Hermon and Lady Hermon (formerly Miss Sylvia Paisley) came to dinner in the Secretariat last night. Sean O hUiginn, Padraic Collins and the undersigned attended.

In the course of a wide-ranging conversation mainly about policing and security related matters in Northern Ireland, Hermon said that, although the security situation remained bleak overall, he was optimistic about the development of better relations between the community and the police in West Belfast. He said the RUC had made real progress of late and, behind the scenes, were now getting a lot of public support. As a result, the detection rate of 'ordinary' crime was now up to about 45% and climbing. This was not widely appreciated. It had not, he said, come about by accident. He had personally taken the initiative with Bishop Daly, for whom he has a high regard, and had brought about better relations between leading local Catholic clergy and his senior officers on the ground. He continues to be critical, nevertheless, of the performance of the SDLP in the area. They had lost the initiative to Sinn Féin on local issues and had made no discernible improvement to their organisation on the ground. He thought, however, that the Westminster seat was still winnable if they got their act together.

In this general context, he was critical of the attitude taken by the NIO on Article 7 matters (relations between the security forces and the community) who, mistakenly in his view, see the issue of community relations as a matter for the Police Authority. In his view, this is the preserve of the Chief Constable.

He believes the force is heading into a very difficult period over the coming two years with the twentieth anniversary of the 'troubles' this year and the tri-centenary of the Battle of the Boyne next year. Public order issues will be very much to the fore and will require careful and delicate handling. For this reason, he regrets that the force will not be in the hands of an Ulsterman. He acknowledges that he himself is to some

extent to blame for this and attributes his failure to provide for a local successor to the fact that he 'lost' three years on 'other issues' (we took this as a reference to the Stalker/Sampson affair).

Of the candidates for the position of Chief Constable, both he and Lady Hermon (who was with him when he saw each of the candidates in his flat) were most impressed by Hugh Annesley (who, as we now know, has been appointed). Although he had made himself available to the candidates and each of them had come to see him, he had made it clear that he wanted to have nothing to do with the process of appointment. It was clear, nevertheless, that he had strong views on the issue - especially on the candidacy of Geoffrey Dear, whom he clearly dislikes - and would be capable of making them known in appropriate circles. Both Dear and Brian Hayes had told him that they would not be bringing their wives to live in Belfast if appointed and he was very critical of this. He described both of them as having a "mercenary" approach to the job, wanting it only for what they could get out of it. He was 'amazed' that none of the candidates had bothered to read the Anglo-Irish Agreement or had anything more than a rudimentary idea of what it was about. Annesley was, however, the most perceptive of them and had asked the right questions.

Hermon is particularly concerned that, given the difficult period ahead, the force should be led by a person capable of standing up to the pressures that would inevitably arise both from the Police Authority and from political level. He recounted how he had found it necessary in the past to refuse to do the bidding of John Stanley and it was clear that in this respect he had also had his difficulties with Tom King. He was very dismissive of Tom Rainey, the Chairman of the Police Authority. It seems that this is a relationship that may have been affected by events surrounding the decision of the Authority (by a majority of one) to bring the question of possible disciplinary action against him to an end over the Stalker/Sampson affair. Another issue that requires a strong, independently minded Chief Constable is relations with the Army which at times can be difficult. He sees the primacy of the police under constant threat in the present security-ridden climate and he made clear that he had had serious reservations about the 3rd Brigade and the Border Zone and had conceded the issue (Army primacy) very reluctantly. He fights his corner with General Waters, the GOC, on this and other issues well and recounted how, when Waters had tried to put the blame for the Ballygawley bus bombing, which killed 8 soldiers, on inadequate police intelligence, he had made it clear to the PM that the incident happened because of inept Army security. He spoke in terms of the "panic reaction" there was in the wake of Ballygawley and how he resented one particular utterance of the PM to the effect that she was not going "to send her boys over in waves to be killed". The neo-colonial connotations of that remark and its World War I overtones upset him and he saw it also as amounting to a distancing of herself and her Government from Northern Ireland.

He spoke very highly of the new Garda Commissioner, of Deputy Commissioner Culligan and Assistant Commissioner O'Dea and expressed the view that the Garda had now got their top management team right. The RUC still had a job to do in that respect. He did not enthuse over any of the present incumbents at the level of Assistant Chief Constable and upwards. Blair Wallace, a possible future contender for the top job, could not, he said, perform well under pressure or in a crisis and this ruled him out, in

Hermon's eyes. On some of the issues that had arisen in security cooperation, in particular issues such as communications between the British Army and the Garda which John Stanley had been pushing, Hermon said that, having read the papers put in by the Irish side in the Conference, he had a much better appreciation of our viewpoint and respected the principles underlying the stance we had taken.

He was warm in his praise of Jim Grew, the Chairman of the Independent Police Complaints Commission, whom he described as an intelligent man, committed to the ideal of public service. It was clear that Hermon was aware of our contacts with Grew and that some of the points we had made to him about improving the complaints system had already been relayed to Hermon. Grew, it seems, had also complained to Hermon about the obstructionist tactics that McAttamney, the Deputy Chief Constable in charge of disciplinary matters, was adopting and Hermon resolved to sort that out so that the "integrity of the Commission's function" would be assured.

He has no regrets about leaving the force and we had the impression that he has not yet sorted out what he will do with his time in retirement. He believes that the RUC needs to be restructured and he outlined his ideas about what he thinks should be done. He would abolish the rank of Senior Assistant Chief Constable and create a second post of Deputy Chief Constable. He would also create within the force a civilian post of Chief Executive in charge of finance and administration and take control of financial matters away from the Police Authority.

His wife, who joined knowledgeably in the conversation, was a lecturer in law at Queen's, specialising in constitutional and EEC law. We touched briefly on some legal issues and she said that she supports the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic UK law. She intends to continue working in the academic legal field doing research and writing for legal journals.

Whatever one might think of Hermon's style and personality, it is clear that he has brought about considerable change in the RUC in his period of office and has substantially improved its essentially sectarian image. This is reflected in the fact that, whereas when Hermon was a candidate for the top job there was only one outside contender, there were at least 10 top-ranking policemen from Britain seriously seeking the job in the recent competition. It remains to be seen what his successor, Hugh Annesley, will do with it.

Yours sincerely



Noel Ryan