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16 October 1990

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division

Dear Assistant Secretary

CONSERVATIVE PARTY CONFERENCE
Bournemouth, 9-12 October

The following report deals with the Anglo-Irish content of the Conservative Party Conference in Bournemouth last week.

Despite predictions that NI would be selected for debate by the balloted motion procedure (and despite intensive lobbying to this end by NI Conservatives), there was in fact no debate on Northern Ireland at the Conference. Delegates opted instead for a debate on broadcasting.

Token references to the evils of IRA terrorism were made in speeches by the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary (linked in both cases to the death of Ian Gow) and by the Defence Secretary.

Outside the Conference proper, fringe meetings were organised, respectively, by the Conservative Political Centre (with Peter Brooke as main speaker); the Monday Club (with David Trimble as speaker); the Friends of the Union (with Willie Ross); and the NI Conservatives (with Edwina Currie as a late substitute for Conor Cruise O'Brien).

Peter Brooke

Anticipating that there would be no Conference debate on NI, the Conservative Political Centre arranged a fringe meeting on 11 October as a platform for the Secretary of State and his Ministerial team. Brooke was joined by Richard Needham and Brian Mawhinney (John Cope having been delayed in NI by the funerals of the two IRA men).

The Secretary of State spoke briefly about his continuing efforts on the political front in NI but hinted that he would favour questions across a wider range of issues. Linking his political efforts to the Government's desire to stimulate investment and economic activity in NI, he encouraged questions about economic and social issues and tried to keep the meeting focussed on these issues.

After an initial reference to the efforts being made to counter paramilitary racketeering, Brooke underlined the helpful role played by the Agreement in the struggle against terrorism. It has also proved itself as a "workmanlike vehicle for working through problems with the Irish Government". Noting that terrorism cannot be defeated by security means alone, Brooke turned to the need for economic action. The hugely disproportionate level of unemployment among NI Catholics constitutes "a seed-bed of deprivation within which terrorists can work". Brooke highlighted the beneficent financial support now coming from the Irish-American community (in contrast to the former dominance of NORAID within that community) and claimed a role for Richard Needham in promoting this. He also paid tribute to Brian Mawhinney's role in the field of community relations.

On the political front, Brooke related his current efforts to an initiative by Tom King early last year and subsequent informal contacts conducted by Mawhinney. He has an open mind about the objective of the talks, though a devolved Assembly seems to him to offer the best prospects. While he envisages no preconditions for the talks, "others" have preconditions and much of this year has been spent trying to work through these. Satisfactory progress has been made. There is, however, one significant issue (the precise basis on which the Irish Government would enter the talks) which was not capable of resolution before the summer and which has been the subject of discussions since then. In Brooke's view, this issue is capable of being overcome in the way in which the previous issues were overcome.

Brooke went on to suggest that, whatever the outcome of his efforts, there has been a marked improvement this year in the climate for political dialogue. The better business climate in NI, he suggested, has made its own contribution to this improvement.

Brooke had earlier made the latter point in a private conversation with Richard Ford of the Times. Ford's reading of this linkage, it is worth mentioning, was that Brooke was preparing a "soft landing" for himself, pending the possible failure of his political efforts, by reminding people of the importance of the economic side of his brief. In a number of private conversations over the past year, Brooke has indicated that, if and when he decides that his political efforts are to no avail, he will return to the economic priorities which go with his job.

In the subsequent question-and-answer session, the NI Conservatives pressed Brooke to consider a strengthening of local government in NI and the ending of the present Order in Council arrangements at Westminster. On the first point, Mawhinney indicated that he would shortly be making

an announcement about the appointment of community relations officers on local councils. On the second point, Brooke observed that any change in the present system would have enormous implications for the workload of the House of Commons. He is happy, however, to discuss with NI MPs what can be done to improve a situation which, he acknowledges, could be more satisfactory.

David Trimble

In his remarks to the Monday Club (10 October), David Trimble dealt first with the Brooke initiative.

He offered an elaborate rationale for the OUP's introduction, in this context, of demands for improvements in the handling of NI business at Westminster (an end to Orders in Council and the establishment of a Select Committee). The Official Unionists understand the first strand of the proposed talks as dealing with relationships within NI as a part of the UK. They regard it as legitimate, therefore, to consider, under the heading of NI's "internal arrangements", how Westminster handles NI business.

Irish nationalists, on the other hand, ignore this UK dimension - and this is part of the reason why the discussions ran into difficulties last July. Last week in Blackpool, Seamus Mallon "let the cat out of the bag" by indicating that the SDLP has no interest in devolution as such. Mallon and Hume are clearly thinking of something along the lines of a confederal relationship with both the UK and the Republic. Viewing the A-I Agreement as a disguised condominium over NI, they envisage an alternative agreement as one which would involve a disguised confederal Ireland. If this is their objective, there is little prospect of agreement with them. The Brooke initiative, Trimble commented, is likely to "run into the ground". The Unionists, however, see no point in breaking off the talks at this stage - "the talks are being broken off by the other parties at the moment".

Trimble went on to suggest, given Kevin McNamara's presence at the Blackpool meeting addressed by Mallon, that Labour may be encouraging the SDLP in their views and that Mallon and Hume may be banking on a future Labour Government to deliver what they want.

The second theme sounded by Trimble was that the Conservative Party is no longer a British national party but merely an English nationalist party. He indicated that, if it became once again a truly national party representing the interests of all parts of the UK, Unionists would be more attracted to it. For the time being, however, a question-mark hangs over the extent of the Conservative Party's commitment to the Union.

In the subsequent question-and-answer session, one individual advocated integration as a means of underlining a common British identity. Trimble's response was that the institutions of government are secondary to the spirit which underlies them. He later described integration as the "logical fulfilment of Unionism", though he would describe himself as

a devolutionist. Asked about a plan for a federal Ireland reportedly advanced by Martin Smyth in the "Orange Standard" in 1988, Trimble said that Smyth had merely proposed a federal structure for the UK's constituent elements and had observed that this might make it easier for the Republic to rejoin the Commonwealth.

Friends of the Union

The speakers at a fringe meeting organised by the Friends of the Union included Viscount Cranborne (who has replaced Ian Gow as the group's Chairman), Willie Ross (OUP), Sir Julian Amery and Nicholas Budgen.

Advocating integration as the "sensible solution" to the NI problem, Cranborne promised to keep up Gow's efforts to influence political, media and public opinion.

Willie Ross urged the British Government to "stop giving in to the nationalists". The 5 July "veto" demonstrated the powerful voice which Dublin now has in NI's internal affairs. Ross also claimed that Ian Gow and Airey Neave were killed because they supported integration, "the one thing that would destroy the IRA".

Sir Julian Amery also backed integration and rejected power-sharing ("which means minority rule"). Expressing similar views, Nick Budgen looked forward to a renewed "communion" between Unionists and Conservatives and attacked Edwina Currie for denigrating the Unionist MPs ("who may be very important to us after the next election").

The remainder of the meeting was characterised by at times heated exchanges between the NI Conservatives and Ross and Budgen. Jonathan Caine of Conservative Central Office indicated afterwards that he found Ross's contributions to this meeting particularly depressing.

The NI Conservatives

About fifty NI Conservatives attended the Conference. They held a fringe meeting on 10 October. In addition, a support group led by Francis Bennion (an Oxford academic and Tory activist) organised two further meetings for fund-raising purposes. Peter Brooke hosted a reception for the NI Conservatives on 11 October.

Laurence Kennedy, who has been officially selected as the Conservative candidate for North Down, addressed all of these meetings. The contradictions between a party professing to be above sectarian politics and its clearly partisan (Unionist) approach to the Agreement were much in evidence during Kennedy's contributions. On the Brooke initiative, Kennedy held that devolution is the wrong approach and that, in any event, no Conservative Secretary of State should be attempting agreement with the socialist and nationalist SDLP.

These and other sniping remarks about HMG's policies did not go unnoticed by the NIO and there was considerable irritation with Kennedy. (Tim Wood, Brooke's former PPS, observed to us that Kennedy did not appear to

have realised that the Conservatives actually form the Government at present). However, the reception hosted by Brooke on 11 October dissolved some of the tensions and the NI Conservatives were in noticeably more conciliatory form at the fringe meeting addressed by Brooke later that day. Brooke, in turn, paid tribute at that meeting to the efforts which the NI Conservatives had made to "get people out of trenches" and to find an alternative to sectarian politics.

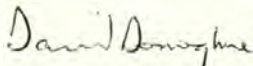
The NI Conservatives' own fringe meeting was to have been addressed by Conor Cruise O'Brien. Kennedy told me that their first choice had been Chris Patten. Patten declined but suggested O'Brien as a replacement. In the event, O'Brien did not appear (apparently because of difficulties in gaining access to the Conference). In his speech, an advance copy of which reached some journalists, he proposed a suspension of the Agreement pending action on Articles Two and Three.

The late substitute for O'Brien was Edwina Currie, fresh from a three-day visit to NI at the invitation of the NI Conservatives. Ms Currie delivered a rambling and platitudinous speech which again attacked the Unionist MPs. Jonathan Caine found the speech as patronising and ignorant as a similar contribution from Ms Currie following a recent visit to Romania.

Brian Mawhinney and the Brooke initiative

Finally, in a private conversation at the Ambassador's reception, Brian Mawhinney was critical of the recent statements by Mallon and Hume. He argued that such statements, even if they are well-intentioned, inevitably prompt adverse reactions on the Unionist side and are therefore unhelpful. The talks process, Mawhinney continued, would be facilitated by "just a little flexibility" from Dublin and the SDLP. When I recalled the many instances of flexibility on Dublin's part, and suggested that it is time for the Unionists to demonstrate this quality, Mawhinney replied that, at their most recent meeting with Brooke, the Unionist leaders would not move on substance. They indicated, however, that, if Dublin and the SDLP were to show some flexibility, they would be prepared to do likewise.

Yours sincerely



David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer