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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

*Always interesting
recount.*

17 Grosvenor Place,
London SW1X 7HR.

12 March, 1990.

Mr. Dermot Gallagher,
Assistant Secretary,
Department of Foreign Affairs,
Dublin.

*cc PJT ; Rfot
H. Wylie, Rfot
H. de la Harpe - H. J. J.
Cassidy H1
Bod.*

Conversation with Charles Powell
Private Secretary to the Prime Minister

Dear Assistant Secretary,

I had lunch on 7 March with Charles Powell. The precise extent of Powell's influence at No. 10 is a favourite subject of speculation among Tory backbenchers, especially within that growing group who are prepared, in private at least, to admit their disenchantment with the Prime Minister. In this quarter many perceive his influence as excessive and inappropriate to his position as an FCO official. All however acknowledge his key role in the decision making process and the high degree of trust and reliance placed in him by the Prime Minister. Many backbenchers who have had direct dealings with him speak highly of his competence, discretion and unobtrusiveness.

Northern Ireland

Clearly, he said, the PM could not keep in touch with the detail of developments in Northern Ireland. Position papers were, however, regularly forwarded by the NIO and she was aware of, and interested in, the broad outline of the Secretary of State's efforts to get something moving. From long experience, he continued, no-one at No. 10 was under any illusion about the obstacles in the path of political progress in Northern Ireland. If, however, Peter Brooke felt there was a chance of achieving something then the strong feeling was that he deserved full support.

He spoke at some length in very positive terms of the Secretary of State. Peter Brooke, he said, was "not at his best in front of a TV camera or speaking on the record to newsmen." He was however a likeable and decent man and above all "a superb and shrewd judge of people." Powell contended that he would never rise to great political heights but neither, he said, had he any wish to. This, he inferred, was a particular strength in his present position since he had no point to prove in terms of career advancement. He was, said Powell, "the best type of regional Government Minister". If Peter Brooke judged that this was a propitious time to try and get the parties talking then the feeling at No. 10 was that his political instincts which were usually right could be trusted.

Few, continued Powell, were however under any illusions about the Unionists. On those few occasions when he personally had met with Jim Molyneux he had great difficulty deciphering what the man was talking about. There was, he admitted, "a certain liking" for Ken Maginnis at No. 10. He was remembered chiefly however as the one who "phoned in the middle of the night" (this presumably was a reference to his activity after Ballygawley). Powell felt that the decision of the Conservatives to organise in NI had had a telling impact on the Unionist leadership which should not be underestimated in persuading them of the need for dialogue.

Anglo-Irish relations

He referred in general terms to the Prime Minister's meetings with the Taoiseach on the margins of successive European Councils. He remarked on the fact that she and the Taoiseach were on first name terms at these meetings something which, he said, was now "almost unique" in her relations with her European colleagues. He felt that whatever the public perception might be the personal rapport between the PM and the Taoiseach had, despite occasional differences of view, always been good.

He went on to say that the practice of meeting bilaterally on the margins of European Councils was, in his opinion, the most effective and productive way of conducting meetings between the PM and the Taoiseach. Specially convened Anglo-Irish summits were not, he felt, a good idea since they inevitably raised expectations unduly and placed an enormous burden on the principals to deliver.

He asked specifically about two issues - the Birmingham Six and the McGimpsey case.

On the Birmingham Six he seemed keen to determine the extent to which it figured as a political priority in Ireland. I briefed him in clear terms of the nature and depth of our concern

The Presidency and EPC issues

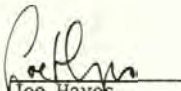
He focused in particular on German reunification and South African sanctions. The PM's approach on both was, he argued, in line with the thinking of the vast majority of British people. She certainly, he said, had the overwhelming support of the core of Conservative voters. He suggested that the reported disaffection among certain MPs and the criticism in the media ignored this fundamental reality and also crudely caricatured her views which he insisted would in the last analysis be proved right on all counts. Kohl's retreat on the Polish border question, he argued, was a perfect vindication of her insistence on the need to avoid a "headlong rush" towards German reunification.

He spoke at length on the British approach to South African sanctions. According to Powell's version of events, De Klerk when he visited London shortly before taking up office had called on Mrs. Thatcher in the expectation that he would find in her a firm supporter.

Instead Powell said he got "a proper dressing down". It was spelt out to him very precisely the steps which he would have to take as Prime Minister viz. Mandela's release, the unbanning of the ANC and the lifting of the state of emergency. With the lifting of the state of emergency which Powell argued was jut a matter of time De Klerk would have delivered on the main items on this agenda. Simple political pragmatism required therefore that De Klerk's advances, delivered at considerable political risk, be acknowledged. All Britain had done, according to Powell, was make the minimum requisite response. Other member states would, he insisted, follow the British lead.

Mandela would be in London on Easter Monday and "was unlikely to leave without calling on the Prime Minister." According to Powell there were substantial differences between Mandela's public rhetoric aimed at the ANC and his private views which acknowledged De Klerk's political courage. According to Powell the one and a half hour delay which preceded Mandela's release from prison was due to heated arguments between the ANC Reception Committee and Mandela about the text of Mandela's address and the degree to which it should pay tribute to De Klerk. Mandela, according to Powell, wanted to speak at some length praising De Klerk but the ANC refused to go along with this. British policy on South Africa, according to Powell, reflected this paradoxical political reality better than most, in particular the political tight rope which De Klerk was required to tread, a political feat which was equally apparent to, and appreciated, by a pragmatist like Mandela.

Yours sincerely,



Joe Hayes
Counsellor

c.c. Asst. Sec. Murphy