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13 November 1990

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division

Some conversations at the Annual Diplomatic Reception

Dear Assistant Secretary

The following points of interest arose in the course of conversations at the annual diplomatic reception in the Palace:

The Prince of Wales

In conversation with the Ambassador, the Prince of Wales spoke in very positive terms of a recent meeting which he had had with Commissioner McSharry. He referred (in a relaxed and friendly way) to his wish to visit Ireland - the one country, he said, which he has not so far visited. He hoped very much that something could be done to make this possible. We understand that his wish to see Ireland is made known to any prominent Irish person he meets. Nonetheless, we felt the conversation merited reporting for the record.

The Cabinet Secretary

In a conversation which the Ambassador had with Sir Robin Butler reference was made to the Dessie Ellis case, (which has given rise to a weekly picket on the Embassy). The Ambassador explained the background to the case. Sir Robin noted Ellis' strong republican ties on both sides of his family, a factor which clearly added to the sensitivity of the case and increased the pressure on Ellis to persevere with his hunger strike.

The Foreign Secretary

In a conversation which I had with the Foreign Secretary he welcomed the decision of John MacGregor, the new leader of the House, to travel to Dublin for the meeting of the Inter-Parliamentary Body. It was important, he said, that Geoffrey Howe's successor maintain an active interest in the Body. The support of a senior figure on the British side

lent the Body credibility and substance. He undertook to have a word with MacGregor before the Dublin meeting to ensure that he was adequately briefed on the background.

Howe's resignation

According to Hurd, the media have blown the affair out of all proportion. Resignations were a fact of political life. He and the Chancellor had nominated the PM for the leadership contest and he had no doubt that she would defeat handsomely any challenge which might develop. Charles Powell, to whom I spoke subsequently, echoed this line remarking that anyone who had seen the PM in action earlier in the day opening the debate on the Queen's speech would be left in little doubt of her determination to see the affair through successfully. This point was underscored in her speech last night to the Annual Lord Mayor's Banquet when, resorting to cricketing metaphor, she threatened to knock her opponents for six.

According to Powell few close observers of the Westminster scene could have been unduly surprised at Howe's resignation although its timing had been "surprising and unfortunate". Nevertheless in the light of efforts to play down the prospect of a serious challenge, the Foreign Secretary's admission that, apart from the CSCE Summit in Paris on 9 November his travel diary for the month had been rearranged to ensure that he spent the maximum time in London over the next few weeks is a telling indication of the underlying anxiety which exists.

Presidential election

The Foreign Secretary (and others with whom we spoke) enquired in some detail about political events in Ireland including the likely outcome of the Presidential election. Hurd spoke about the Foreign Ministers' meeting in Rome and asked about the outcome of the visit to Baghdad by Deputies Andrews, O'Higgins and Bradford. Our Minister had been commendably tough and outspoken on this at the Rome meeting. We all had our problems with these unauthorised visits which simply played into the hands of Saddam Hussein. Some, however, were better able to deal with the issue than others.

Yours sincerely


Joe Hayes