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Reference Code:	2020/17/58
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AMBASÁID NA hÉIREANN, LONDAIN



IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON



17, GROSVENOR PLACE,
SW1X 7HR
Telephone: 01-235 2171
TELEX: 916104

Confidential

19 March 1990

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division

NO26

Dear Assistant Secretary

Lunch with George Jones, Daily Telegraph

Jones is the Political Editor of the Daily Telegraph.

The following points of interest arose:

The Supreme Court decision

- In responding to a clearly planted PQ on this subject last Thursday, the Prime Minister was simply "doing her ritual bit". She has an automatic "reflex" whenever extradition comes up and, whether or not Peter Brooke had given the Government's position on the previous day, she was determined to place her own views on record.
- It was also obvious last Thursday that she was anxious to divert attention, however temporarily, from her own poll tax difficulties.
- Her pronouncements on extradition or terrorism, however, are no longer particularly newsworthy. The Telegraph's lobby team filed a story on her reply but the news editor dropped it, pointing out that the paper had already carried the initial Downing Street comment and Peter Brooke's statement. Only if an extradition request relates to an atrocity committed in mainland Britain, Jones suggested, does the British public take any real interest in it.
- I briefed Jones on the background to the Supreme Court decision, drawing particular attention to the Hutton judgement. I also contrasted the Prime Minister's intervention with the silence observed by the Irish Government on the recent Law Lords decision (despite the hostility which that decision aroused North and South).

Noting that the Irish Government had also refrained from criticising last Thursday's reply, I suggested that the Taoiseach was handling Anglo-Irish relations with far greater care than the Prime Minister. In reply, Jones asked sardonically when the Prime Minister had ever done anything to improve Anglo-Irish relations - "apart, that is, from signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement".

Political situation in NI

- Jones commented that the current political activity in NI is a difficult story for the media to follow. The NIO "whips us up" with hints about break-throughs and, a day or so later, Molyneaux and Paisley demonstrate that the Unionist position is completely unchanged. Many journalists, Jones indicated, are becoming extremely wary (not to say weary) and are keeping their distance from the story.
- I strongly supported the caution signalled by Jones, suggesting that the NIO may have considerably over-estimated the scope for political movement. The extent of the Unionist leaders' interest in talks, and of their readiness to circumvent the obstacles they themselves have placed in the way of talks, is far from clear. Jones shared these reservations fully.
- He sketched out a scenario in which the Unionist leaders would "play along" with Brooke for another couple of months until the marching season intervenes and the attempt to stimulate talks has to be abandoned. In the autumn, they would "sit back", looking ahead to the next election and the increased leverage which either of the likely outcomes (a reduced Tory majority or a Labour victory) will give them. Molyneaux will hope to trade the Unionist votes for major concessions and will tell his supporters, accordingly, that the best policy is to do nothing until the election comes.
- In relation to Chris Ryder, Jones said there is a view in the Telegraph that Ryder is being used by someone to float various kites. When I suggested the name Brian Mawhinney, he nodded in agreement. Ryder, he commented, is best on security stories and few trust him on political developments. The problem, however, is that, with an eye to the circulation war with other dailies, people at senior levels in the Telegraph all too often give the benefit of the doubt to what appears to be a Ryder "scoop".

Political situation in Britain

- The Prime Minister is at present under greater political pressure than at any previous time during her period in office. In contrast to the Westland crisis and the Lawson resignation, which generated a lot of heat in Westminster and Whitehall but had no lasting repercussions elsewhere, the poll tax affects everyone and she is personally blamed for it. "She is on a hook and will not be able to wriggle off it".

1 - There is also a growing view in the Conservative Party that she has been around for too long and that the party needs a change. "She herself has now become the issue".

1 - The rumour that she may step down on her 65th birthday, which falls during next October's party conference, is being put around by a number of senior Tory figures, who are anxious to "create the conditions" for an orderly handover to a successor.

- If she stepped down then, or at a later stage, Sir Geoffrey Howe would take over as caretaker Prime Minister for a couple of weeks. Current speculation is that, in the first round of the leadership election, there could be as many as seven or eight candidates, including Howe, Hurd, Patten, Major, Tebbit, Waddington and Heseltine. (Baker might also stand but his identification with the poll tax would count heavily against him). In the second round, a possible scenario would involve Patten and Major transferring their support to Hurd and Tebbit yielding to Waddington (as the right-wing torch-bearer). The enormous support commanded by Heseltine at constituency level, however, would then come into play. The expectation is that many MPs who might have personal reservations about Heseltine would come under substantial pressure from their constituencies to support him. (By the autumn of this year, Heseltine will have spoken in over half of all UK constituencies).
- As regards the outcome of the next election, the current speculation within Conservative circles is that, if Heseltine takes over, the Tories will come back with a comfortable majority, though below the current level. If the Prime Minister leads them into the election, however, they will at best scrape home, probably with a majority of less than thirty. There are also those who fear that, despite the improbable electoral arithmetic, Labour could win an overall majority.

Yours sincerely

David Donoghue

David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer