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Confidential

14 December 1990

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division

Dear Assistant Secretary

John Major's first Commons replies on NI

As you are aware, the Prime Minister replied to two questions of Anglo-Irish interest during Prime Minister's Questions yesterday.

The first question, by Peter Robinson, referred to Wednesday's debate in Dail Eireann and asked whether the Prime Minister would encourage the amendment of Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution. In response, the Prime Minister said that he certainly proposed to study carefully what was said the previous day.

The second question, by John Taylor, asked whether the Prime Minister recognised the unease and alarm caused by Peter Brooke's recent indication that the British Government has no strategic or economic interest in NI. Taylor asked whether the Prime Minister would prove that he is the leader of the Conservative and Unionist Party, not just the Conservative Party, and support and strengthen the Union between GB and NI. In response, the Prime Minister said that Taylor would know that troops were in NI both because that is the wish of the people of NI and to ensure the security of the people of NI. That is and remains the position. It is generally accepted throughout NI that the Secretary of State is one of the best friends that the province has had for a long time.

1 These replies, the first on Anglo-Irish issues since the new Prime Minister took over, were the subject of favourable comment among a number of Westminster journalists to whom I talked later. There was a general

view that, with Unionist MPs clearly trying to set traps for him, Major had shown himself to be sure-footed, keeping well away from the traps and confining himself to innocuous and non-committal language. John Cole remarked jocosely to me that the replies were proof that the new Prime Minister knows nothing about Northern Ireland - but, in contrast to his predecessor ("who also knew nothing"), he has the good sense to say as little as possible in public about it. One or two contacts observed that, with his effusive praise for Brooke as "one of the best friends the province has had for a long time", Major appeared to be overlooking the contribution made by Douglas Hurd. One contact remarked that, given Major's complete unfamiliarity with Irish issues, it was even possible that he had forgotten that Hurd had once held the NI portfolio.

By way of background to John Taylor's question to the Prime Minister, it is worth mentioning that, according to indications we had had, the Brooke speech of 9 November caused some flutters of concern not just among Unionist MPs but also in right-wing Tory circles (possibly inspired by the NI Conservatives).

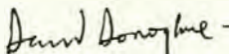
Following the speech, Laurence Kennedy of the NI Conservatives complained bitterly to Peter Brooke about the suggestion that the British Government has "no selfish strategic or economic interest in NI". He argued that the British Government cannot be neutral in this matter and that its role should be one of actively shoring up support for the Union. Jonathan Caine of Central Office told me that, with his attacks on Brooke both in public and in private since the 9 November speech, Kennedy has been steadily eroding whatever little sympathy and goodwill the NI Conservatives enjoy within Government circles and at Central Office.

In a conversation in the Commons yesterday, Barry Porter MP, who attended this week's meeting of the B-I Interparliamentary Body in Dublin, said that he had detected a certain amount of "excitement" in Dublin, arising from the 9 November speech, about what was perceived there to be a shift of policy on the British Government's part. He had also detected a corresponding degree of concern on the part of Unionists about the speech. He therefore raised it with Brian Mawhinney on the margins of yesterday's meeting of the EPA Select Committee, suggesting that there was a need for the Government to make clear that there had been no policy shift. Mawhinney reportedly said that an opportunity would be found to make this clear.

The question from John Taylor then intervened. Porter was satisfied by the absence from Major's reply of any reference to, let alone endorsement of, the suggestion that Britain has no strategic or economic interest in remaining in NI. (He also noted that, in quoting the relevant phrase from Brooke's speech, Taylor had omitted the qualifying adjective "selfish" - a qualification which Porter found significant). On the other hand, Kevin McNamara, in a separate conversation, was pleased with Major's reply because it gave no comfort whatsoever to the Unionists.

It is worth mentioning, finally, that, in the context of a visit which Dr Garret FitzGerald is to pay to London next month, Barry Porter yesterday asked David Trimble whether he would be prepared to meet Dr FitzGerald informally. When Trimble reacted hesitantly, saying he had already met Dr FitzGerald on a previous occasion, Porter pressed him, saying that he would be inviting Ken Maginnis as well. Trimble remained non-committal. Explaining this approach in a private conversation afterwards, Porter said he had formed a strong impression from his contacts in Dublin this week that Fine Gael, Labour and the Workers Party are all "coming around to sympathy for the Unionists' position" (on Articles 2 and 3 as well as on other issues).

Yours sincerely



David Donoghue
Press and Information Officer