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Reference Code:	2021/93/45
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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

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28 February, 1991.

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

Conversation with Jim Kilfedder, MP

Dear Assistant Secretary,

I had lunch on 27 February with Jim Kilfedder. Despite his isolated maverick position and his somewhat quixotic eccentric personality, Kilfedder is popular among backbenchers on both sides of the House. He is especially well liked on the Conservative side where comparisons are often made between his diligence and affability and the poor Westminster attendance record and dourness of many of the Unionists. Although most of our conversation was taken up with lengthy reminiscences about his political career especially about his time as speaker of the Assembly, the following points may be of some interest.

The Unionists

Kilfedder has little time for the OUP. Of all of them however, he seems to have most contact with Jim Molyneux who like himself feels most at home with the rituals at Westminster. He harbours a particular antipathy to John Taylor. He recently told Molyneux that if Taylor was his most likely successor, Molyneux owed a patriotic and moral duty to Northern Ireland to stay put until a more acceptable political heir apparent turned up. According to Kilfedder, Molyneux did not demur.

Kilfedder retailed numerous anecdotes illustrating his perception of the OUP's poor standing at Westminster but many of which also highlighted his distance from mainstream Unionism. With particular vehemence, for example, he recounted arriving at Westminster last week to see the OUP posing for a press photograph with other minority party backbenchers. When he enquired of Roy Beggs what was afoot, the latter told him that the photo related to some unimportant IPU business. Kilfedder subsequently discovered that it was a PA photo of backbenchers who, like himself, had supported the Government line on the Gulf War. He contrasted Beggs deliberate unhelpfulness on this with a situation which had arisen the previous evening - 26 February - when Beggs, arriving late for a division on the Road Traffic Bill, had bumped into Kilfedder and with no apparent embarrassment from their previous encounter had sought Kilfedder's guidance on how the House was dividing.

He was equally disparaging of others in the OUP, especially of David Trimble whom he said had succeeded in alienating all shades of opinion in the House within a few months of his arrival at Westminster.

Talks Process

He would never believe that Jim Molyneux had any intention from the outset of agreeing to a process which could result in some form of devolved Government in Northern Ireland. Molyneux was fundamentally an integrationist. He would of course have had to go along with the process but Kilfedder simply could not envisage Molyneux ever irrevocably abandoning integrationism ... "you can bring that particular horse to water but he'll never drink from a poisoned well".

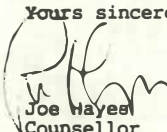
So far the Unionists had been able to accommodate the fundamental divergence of view on devolution which separates Molyneux and Paisley but if it ever came to substantive inter-party talks, no amount of fudging could cover the cracks on this issue for very long. At heart, Molyneux was also well aware of the shortcomings of the Unionist team and he knew that in any negotiating situation his people would be no match for the SDLP, not to mention the obvious inequality of a situation where they were obliged to engage in talks with Dublin. In any event, in Kilfedder's opinion, with a possible General election looming there could be little prospect of any movement on the talks process.

The next election

Kilfedder, like most MPs here in recent days, is increasingly of the view that there will be a June election. Personally, he would prefer more time. He is confident of seeing off the threat in North Down from the Conservative candidate Laurence Kennedy. In Kilfedder's opinion, the Conservative Association made a fatal error in choosing him as their candidate ... "would you vote for a man with a mad gleam in his eye". The conservatives entry into the race complicated Kilfedder's position, however, since he cannot now adopt the Conservative mantle in the election. Neither can he, however, afford to move too far to the left or be seen to overly emphasise his Unionist credentials. His biggest concern is that the Conservatives will split the vote and allow in the DUP candidate, "a very active but thoroughly odious man". Paisley, whom he seems to have some sneaking regard for, told him jokingly the other day that the DUP would run him very close.

On the broader front, he believes that both the Conservatives and Labour have started to put out discreet feelers to the smaller parties, including the Unionists about possible post-election scenarios. Kinnock's office, he claims, has definitely established some contact with Molyneux.

Yours sincerely,


Joe Hayes
Counsellor