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Reference Code:	2021/93/53
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Mr S. O hUiginn
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division

9 December, 1991.

Dear Assistant Secretary

Conversation with David Hughes, Sunday Times.

Hughes is chief political correspondent with the Sunday Times.
He made a number of points of interest:

Next Election:

Major will want to choose his own timing and avoid being driven right up the wire. Hughes' own guess is that he will call an election around 14 March for early April - before too many Poll-Tax bills have dropped through the letter boxes of Britain. He expects a Tory victory and guessed that they would end up with a small, but workable majority of around 25 seats.

Labour Party:

While he felt that Kinnock had considerable achievements to his credit - most notably his ending of the continuous internal blood-letting within the Labour Party - nonetheless he continues to have a very serious credibility problem with the British public. Hughes ascribed this to Kinnock's faulty tactical judgement and to his generally poor performance in the House of Commons.

By way of example, Hughes pointed to the recent European debate in the House of commons. Instead of situating his party in the mainstream of European Social Democracy and playing to Labour's strength - social issues; Kinnock chose to play to Labour's weakness - economic issues. Hughes' own belief is that Labour should have changed leader about a year ago and chosen John Smith. Had they done so, he believed that they would be heading for victory in the next election.

Labour's weak point is the economy. The British economy continues "to bump along the bottom", but Labour is failing to exploit this. In Hughes' view people simply don't trust Labour, and more particularly Kinnock, on the economy. He sees a difficult paradox in this for Labour. People are preoccupied with the recession and may blame the Tories for causing it. To date however, this has not translated itself into a significant swing to Labour. The public perception continues to be that the Tories are the party best equipped to get the economy out of the recession. So long as the recession continues, the economy (Labour's weak point) will dominate the political debate. In that situation, social issues like the reform of the National Health Service, where Labour are strongest, will be relegated to second place in the debate.

Liberal Democrats:

The Liberals' problem is that they have an image of a one-man-band. In his view, Paddy Ashdown is by far the most attractive party leader - "he would make a superb Presidential candidate in the United States". However, while one or two of the front bench are good performers, the party fails to give an image of having a team for Government. Notwithstanding their considerable success in local Government and the fact that they are second to the Tories in a significant number of constituencies, he felt that they are still not seen as providing an alternative to the Tories. That mantle still belongs to Labour. In overall terms, he expects that the exposure of the election campaign will improve the Liberals' standing and he expects them to make some, albeit limited, gains at the next election.

Scottish Devolution:

As a Welshman (from the Rhondda), Hughes displayed a particular sensitivity to the issues involved in the Scottish devolution debate. No matter which side wins the next election, he feels that the devolution debate will have to be addressed. Politicians on all sides are becoming acutely aware of the dangers inherent in the developing regional polarisation of British politics with England (and especially its heavily populated south-east) dominated by the Conservative Party; while Scotland and Wales are dominated by the Labour Party. Scottish Tories "are in danger of becoming an endangered species" and he pointed out that it is not inconceivable that, after the next election, the Tories may hold only one of the 72 Scottish seats in the House of Commons.

To date, Major has not focused on the issue and has confined his remarks to saying that he supports the Union. Hughes's opinion is that some form of devolution may in the long-run be the safest way of supporting the Union.

Northern Ireland:

He had noted the fact that the Taoiseach and John Major appeared to have established a good relationship - a relationship which he assumed would be cemented by the recent summit decision to hold regular six-monthly meetings. Like most observers here, he felt that Major had no preconceptions about Northern Ireland. Hughes expected that once Maastricht is out of the way, Major will begin to focus on other issues - including Northern Ireland - "the sort of issue where he is likely to feel that something should be done". He assumed that Brooke will not continue as Secretary of State after the next election and the choice of a successor will be a key indicator of Major's thinking on the subject. In that context, the only name he had heard rumoured was that of John Patten, currently a junior Home office minister. He thought that Patten's name might have arisen largely because Patten "has been knocking on the cabinet door for some time". However, Hughes wondered whether Patten's Catholicism might not count against him for the Northern Ireland job.

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Brendan McMahon
Press & Information Officer