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25 October 1995

Counsellors At  
✓ Box-

Mr Sean O hUiginn  
Second Secretary  
Anglo-Irish Division  
HQ

Dear Secretary

Meeting with Kate Hoey MP

I had lunch on Monday 23 October with Kate Hoey. She is seen as the only outright Unionist on the Labour benches, and is the colleague of MPs such as Harry Barnes, Nick Raynsford, and Calum McDonald in the pressure group "Democracy Now". As this was my first extended conversation with her, I am reporting it in some detail.

Background

Hoey was "imposed" by the National Executive Committee as Labour candidate in the 1989 by-election in Vauxhall, a safe Labour seat that includes Lambeth, Waterloo Station and Clapham Common. At that time, against left-wing opposition and an alternative candidate drawn from the large local black community, Hoey was supported by the Irish vote within the Labour Party and enjoyed the endorsement of the then editor of the Irish Post. From a Unionist background in Antrim, she supported the Civil Rights Movement and was arrested in 1972 at a protest after Bloody Sunday. It seems possible that some of her colleagues assumed that her views on Irish issues would compare broadly with those of other members of the Labour Party.

As a member of Parliament, Hoey has acquired a somewhat different profile on Northern Ireland. She describes herself as a Unionist and is a principal influence behind "Democracy Now", the pressure group which wants Labour Party membership to be available to residents of Northern Ireland.

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We gather that Hoey is on good terms with David Seymour, Political Editor for the Mirror Group, whom, as it happens, Mr Colin Wrafter met for lunch on Monday. Seymour told Colin that while he personally finds Kate Hoey "very persuasive", it is not the case that the Mirror is pro-Unionist on Irish matters. According to Seymour, David Montgomery, the Chief Executive [comment: who was actively involved in Vanguard during the 1970s], does not interfere in editorial matters. Seymour also adverted to the high circulation of the Mirror in Ireland, North and South; in the North the paper tends to sell more copies among the Nationalist community. But the Mirror has sponsored an annual fringe meeting organised by Democracy Now at the Labour Party Conference - to the extent of paying for a room at a cost of a few hundred pounds.

Hoey is a typical "new Labour" MP and is believed to be on terms of social intimacy with Tony and Cherie Blair. It is doubtful, however, if she wields a corresponding practical influence. She was not among the group of recently-elected MPs, including several women, who were promoted on Monday to Labour's front bench.

#### Labour's Irish policy

Hoey arrived for our appointment in a vintage Mini Minor, remarking - out of political correctness - that "one shouldn't drive in London". She warmly welcomed the fact that I had invited her to lunch. Although the Irish Embassy has been kind to her, she said, some of her Labour Party colleagues have treated her as though she were "a fascist" because of her Unionist views. When we both chose potatoes as a side order, she suggested that it was because of "our Irish upbringing".

Hoey said that her main impression of current Labour Party policy on Ireland is that there is a low level of interest in the Parliamentary Party. When Mo Mowlam recently addressed the backbench committee for the first time in six months, there were only eleven other people in the room, although the meeting was open to all members of the PLP. Hoey's best recollection of the attendance-list was as follows: Tony Worthington, Dennis Canavan, Roger Stott, Max Madden, Kevin McNamara, Peter Hain, Jim Marshall, Michael Connarty, Ian Davidson, Harry Barnes and Hoey herself. Calum McDonald sent apologies.

In Hoey's view, the key feature of current Labour policy is that the Party is no longer "a persuader for Irish unity". This was a change brought about by Blair "single-handedly". Although Kevin McNamara was disappointed to be moved, a change was inevitable. While McNamara was "never a supporter of violence", he had no credibility with Unionists.

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Hoey's personal views

As our conversation proceeded, Hoey's views on a number of Northern Ireland-related topics emerged clearly:

- \* concern over the Anglo-Irish Agreement, support for the Downing Street Declaration, scepticism at the Framework Document
- \* unease about Articles 2 and 3 (a point touched on lightly)
- \* acceptance that the ceasefire [comment: in the singular] is real
- \* a belief that the Irish Government has "gone soft" on decommissioning, combined with a readiness to be reassured if the alternative to Washington Three involves a substantive programme of disarmament as talks proceed
- \* a degree of flexibility on prisons' issues, especially transfers
- \* strong criticism of John Hume and a disposal to believe that Sinn Fein basically "hate the Brits"
- \* strong support for early elections to a Northern Ireland Assembly
- \* an assertion that Unionists are Irish and British, as one can be Scottish and British, rather than simply British.

With reference to the final point, that it is possible to be both Irish and British, Hoey wanted the Irish Government to take further steps to demonstrate to Unionists that their identity is respected: membership of the Commonwealth "could be very important".

The above checklist of opinions illustrates how closely Hoey's thinking mirrors that of the UUP.

Labour in Northern Ireland

Towards the end of our meal Hoey directly asked me my attitude to her position on opening Labour Party membership to residents of Northern Ireland. This became the most animated and revealing part of our conversation.

I suggested that a Labour presence in Northern Ireland, whether or not it involved running candidates in elections, would be understood on all sides in terms of its implications for the peace process and the shape of a political settlement. In particular it would worry the SDLP, and for that reason

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could undermine any approach based on an accommodation between the two traditions.

Hoey - not surprising given her background - argued that it is unreasonable to expect Protestants to identify with the SDLP and that therefore there should be another way of expressing a preference for Labour policies.

I suggested that the present moment, when the peace process is poised for possible success, is not ideal for pushing a point of this kind. I then argued that while it is understandable to argue for a right to join the political party of one's choice, the most salient feature of Democracy Now in Nationalist eyes is, not its campaign for a Labour Party presence in Northern Ireland, but its open disagreement with the Northern Ireland policies of both the Conservative Government and the Labour Opposition. I questioned the connection between promoting the Labour Party on the one hand, and on the other hand rejecting North/South institutions, power-sharing, and other proposals aimed at achieving a balance between Nationalist and Unionist interests.

Hoey said that the basic problem in Northern Ireland has been discrimination and that if discrimination is ended, most Catholics will "not clamour" for a united Ireland.

I responded that it is unfair to use the patience and reasonableness of most Nationalists and of the Irish Government as a reason for conceding nothing at all. Was Hoey arguing that there is no such thing as the Nationalist tradition? Was she saying to someone like Seamus Mallon that his consent to the way Northern Ireland is governed is not required?

Hoey said she would not deny "cultural rights" to Nationalists. Sinn Fein can have "its aspirations". Anyone in Northern Ireland, Catholic or Protestant, "might enjoy Irish dancing". But it is not normal for people "who lose elections" to demand special arrangements. "It wouldn't happen in Scotland".

I argued that the approach of the Irish and British Governments gives Unionists an opportunity to achieve a stable society in Northern Ireland with the blessing of the Irish people North and South. To get to this result, some reasonable concessions to Nationalists are required.

Hoey made the point - although I thought with diminishing conviction - that North/South arrangements could have little significance in themselves and would be of interest to Nationalists and Sinn Fein only as a lever towards a united Ireland. Our discussion then came to an end because another coin was due in the parking meter outside the restaurant. We agreed to resume our debate on another occasion. Hoey encouraged me to get in touch with Bob McCartney MP, whom she

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described as "entirely non-sectarian" and an important figure for the post-Paisley Northern Ireland.

Overall impression

Kate Hoey makes a pleasant overall impression. Her manner is middle-class and metropolitan, she is a former high-jump champion and PE instructor, and she is happy to talk about her partner, a well-known photographer who has recently won a United Nations award. She speaks with a friendly exasperation of Labour Party colleagues from the Nationalist wing of the party - although their stance on Northern Ireland is arguably closer than her own to the policies expressed officially by Mo Mowlam.

It is dismaying that the further one presses Hoey on matters of policy, the more one is in the presence of an ideology of which the pillars seem to be

- \* an assumption that many or most Catholics in Northern Ireland would be happy to support the Union if certain basic rights are respected and prosperity grows
- \* a tendency to equate real Nationalism only with Sinn Fein
- \* a doctrine about "cultural rights" as the area within which concessions might be made to Nationalists collectively
- \* a determination to treat the Republic as no more and no less than a foreign state with which to establish "normal relations".

This said, Hoey is more than willing to engage in open discussion. My sense, from overtones and undertones (and her opening remarks about potatoes!) is that she would not be likely to oppose the terms of an agreed settlement. In the meantime she remains, in her own terms, determinedly non-sectarian.

Yours sincerely

*Philip McDonagh*

Philip McDonagh  
Counsellor