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THE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT: DESPATCH FROM HM AMBASSADOR, DUBLIN

1. I have seen a copy of Sir Alan Goodison's despatch of 13 December addressed to the Foreign & Commonwealth Secretary. It has been composed with that elegance and lucidity which are powerful ornaments of the Ambassador's profession. But as for content, I fear that it is redolent of that fatuous complacency which has misinformed, and may continue to misinform Ministers about actions, realities and prospects in Northern Ireland.

2. Let me pose a question, drawing upon quotations from the despatch. Why is it, if Dr Fitzgerald had "an unusual willingness to take account of Unionist sensitivities", and if the Irish were "not going to ignore unionist interests nor, what is vital to us, unionist wishes" that we have achieved an outcome which has had the remarkable result of uniting Bishop, editor, unionist moderate and Loyalist corner-boy in a coalition of outrage? How did it come about, drawing this time upon her interview published in the Belfast Telegraph, that our own Prime Minister found the reaction to the Agreement "much worse than I expected"? There are many who could have told her or those commending the Agreement to her (if they had ever sought to ask) that such a reaction was entirely predictable.

3. Paragraph 4 of the summary of the despatch describes the Agreement as having been "well received". The only reference to the little local difficulties within Northern Ireland itself is in the bland terms of paragraph 16:

"The kaleidoscope of Northern Ireland has been shaken, and it is not yet easy to discern precisely the intricacies of the new pattern that has been formed". As one of the pieces being shaken within that particular kaleidoscope, I find the Ambassador's image far from reassuring.

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4. Such is the received wisdom about the Agreement and its aftermath which is now winging its way not only to the Cabinet and Foreign Offices and the MOD, but also to remote diplomatic missions in Sana'a or Caracas. It is based on a perception which regularly comments upon the "Irish Times" but does not take the "Belfast Telegraph" under its notice.

5. I really think some fundamental questions have to be asked about the role and standing of the Northern Ireland Office. If the Northern Ireland problem was regarded as a wholly internal one, the NIO would presumably be accepted as the lead Department in all matters relating to it, and the full resources and accumulated experience of the Office would be involved in working out policy, strategy and tactics. If, on the other hand, Northern Ireland were an external territory, the local UK representation would be providing for the whole of official Whitehall regular reporting which would convey the flavour of local comments, attitudes and reactions. As it is, I fear we fall between two stools. The Foreign and Cabinet Offices will not let the NIO get on with the job of running Northern Ireland; nor will they, on the other hand, take any credible steps to inform themselves at first hand about the complexities and nuances of the local situation.

6. It is a great temptation in government (and no doubt in other forms of activity) to exclude from the processes of policy formation those who may give advice which one does not particularly want to hear. To yield to that temptation, however, is to risk making great misjudgements. I am not at all confident that an implementation of the Agreement strongly influenced by the perceptions of the Foreign and Cabinet Offices will, in the end, promote "peace, stability and reconciliation in Northern Ireland".

KCB

K P BLOOMFIELD

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