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Mr. Keenan

AD 10/10

8th October, 1974

Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

For the Attention of Assistant Secretary Donlon

As the general election campaign draws to a close, it becomes increasingly difficult to forecast what the outcome will be. All the polls in recent days, and indeed since the start of the campaign, have put Labour comfortably ahead of the Tories, with leads ranging from 4½% (Business Decisions in the Observer) to 9.8% (Marplan in the News of the World). At the same time, this remains one of the most open elections in recent British history, and one whose result both politicians (in private) and journalists are increasingly unwilling to anticipate with any degree of confidence. The gap between Labour and Tory seems to have marginally narrowed in recent days and it is, of course, the large percentage of hitherto undecided voters who will determine the outcome.

The basic forecasting problem is complicated by the fact that the United Kingdom must, for election purposes, be divided into three main regions (excluding Northern Ireland), where quite different, though inter-related, campaign battles are being waged. These are the Tory-Labour marginals in the Midlands and North of England, which traditionally decide the Government of the country, the Tory seats, particularly in Southern England, where the Liberals came a threatening second last February and, thirdly, Scotland, where both Tory and Labour seats are subject to threat from the Nationalists. It is, therefore, not sufficient to establish a national swing and apply it to the country simpliciter. Rather must one try and establish regional and even individual constituency swings and subsequently attempt to place them within the overall national context.

Last February, Labour won the election - in so far as

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there was a winner at all - because the Liberals eroded and, in some cases, completely eliminated formerly safe Tory majorities in the South while, at the same time, they made little impact on the Labour strongholds in the North. This is a pattern which some observers see being repeated on Thursday, given that there are over the country as a whole 47 Conservative-held seats where Liberals are in second place and within 15% of victory. Our own assessment of the situation is that this is unlikely to happen. We still do not expect the Liberal break-through to occur on this occasion and we would not anticipate, therefore, any significant increase in the number of Liberal M.P.s returned to the next Parliament.

The second crucial area is Scotland where the S.N.P., though hampered to a certain extent by appearing to seek a mandate on a one issue basis, are running a highly organised and professional campaign. Their party leaders are apparently prepared to admit in private that they would be happy to double their representation from seven to fourteen. Last Friday's ORC poll in the Scoteman indicated that they had, with 28% of the electorate, relegated the Tories to third place. If this is reliable, they have, according to the views we now receive, a fighting chance of winning from four to nine seats from the two major parties. However, as in the rest of Britain, all depends on where they poll their extra votes and on how the supporters of third placed Tory or Labour candidates decide to vote on this occasion - in short, again as in Britain as a whole, the result in terms of seats won need not necessarily coincide with, or be determined by, a national swing. On our present information and allowing for the above complicating factors we would envisage a modest increase in the number of S.N.P. candidates returned at the election, possibly more at the expense of Labour than of the Tories.

We come, therefore, to the constituencies which seem to constitute the key to the election outcome - the seats where Tory and Labour run fairly close - and where a small swing to either party could give them the required overall majority of 318 seats. The position briefly

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is that, if Labour is to win, it must make inroads into the concentration of Tory marginals in middle England, while, if the Tories are to be returned to power, they must recapture the seats they lost to Labour last February in the North of England. The view in Conservative Headquarters is that the swing to Labour in these marginals is a little less than in the country as a whole. As against this, the polls suggest that the voting intentions of Labour supporters in the marginals are stronger than elsewhere, a not unimportant factor in a party traditionally afraid of a low poll. In view of this latter point, therefore, and, inter alia, of the comparative lack of impact of the Conservative campaign, we still see the possibility of Labour doing well enough in these key constituencies to increase its number of M.P.s at Westminster and probably winning a small overall majority.

It is unnecessary at this stage to go into further detail about the campaign trends and themes, which have not in fact changed to any appreciable degree since our two previous reports. The Labour campaign, for instance, has remained firmly on the ground chosen by Mr. Wilson for the election - his party's social contract with the unions even though this has suffered a few shocks in recent days, shocks which the Tories should have been able to make more of. Other issues have, of course, been introduced by Labour at different stages; last week, for example, the Prime Minister told one of his audiences that the Common Market was an issue, with the question being "are the British people to be given the right, through the ballot box, to decide their future - in or out". In the same week, Jim Callaghan interpreted German dissatisfaction with CAP as evidence that powerful forces within the Community shared Labour's criticisms of the terms negotiated by the Tories. This must certainly have been some help to Labour.

The Tories, on the other hand, were bedevilled during most of the campaign by the absence of a strongly marketable issue and, in particular, by their weakness on the industrial relations question due, in large

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part, to the credibility factor associated with their major policy switch from confrontation with the unions in February to conciliation with them in October. Their only clear challenge to Labour was on housing, where Margaret Thatcher's promise of 9½% mortgages by Christmas posed problems for Transport House, though their warnings about the dangers of nationalisation may prove more damaging to the Government than has so far been anticipated. It was probably this absence of a central Tory campaign issue, and the parallel problem of their poor showing in the polls, which led Mr. Heath in the past week to introduce and heavily emphasise his Government's National Unity theme (he promised on Sunday night that, if he won the election, he would "establish a government that can transcend party divisions, a government representing men of goodwill of all parties and of none"). It is very doubtful, however, if the Tories really believe in this concept and, to many observers, it must seem a last desperate gamble to win the election at all costs. In addition, there is obviously an acute credibility problem in marketing such a concept at this late stage - not least for those Tories who are being tightly pressed by second-placed Liberals - and in particular given Mr. Heath's strong confrontation image of last February. Up to now, its impact on the campaign seems to have been very limited.

To sum up, therefore, the election seems likely, at this stage, to produce either a small overall Labour majority or to return them to Westminster as the largest party but we would be a little more doubtful now than, say, a week ago about the possibility of an over-all majority. They have run a good campaign and have used intelligently the decided asset of having a more popular leader, and a much more competent front bench, than the Conservatives. Indeed, Ted Heath's image seems to be seriously affecting his party's fortunes in the country; an ORC poll, for instance, in last Friday's Evening Standard suggested that, with a different leader, the Tories would poll more heavily on Thursday, and, in particular, would attract a considerable number of Liberal and uncommitted voters. At the same time, however, the polls and the pundits were

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wrong both in 1970 and in February, 1974, and these two elections indicated clearly the changeability of the electorate and the tendency for the gap between the two main parties to close as election day approaches. If the Conservatives, therefore, had a leader other than Ted Heath at the moment, one would be much more doubtful about the likelihood of a narrow Labour victory margin.

As indicated in earlier reports, Northern Ireland was not an issue during the campaign and, as you will have gathered from the Irish papers' reports of Sunday's meeting at St. Pancras, the ICRA intrusion is a purely peripheral one, the final nail in whose coffin has been driven in by the Guildford bombing outrage.

DONAL O'SULLIVAN
Ambassador