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27th January 1977

Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

For the attention of Gearoid O Broin

I wish to report that I had lunch on last Monday with Chris Patten, the Director of the Conservative Research Office, and took the opportunity to brief him at some length on various aspects of Government policy, particularly as regards Northern Ireland. Patten, as you will be aware from previous correspondence, is extremely influential in Tory policy circles and it was he, for instance, who drafted almost single-handedly their policy document, The Right Approach, which was issued just before the Party conference last October. He has a great affinity for Ireland and spent many holidays there in his student days in the 1960s (he is in his mid-thirties). I understand also that his grandparents on both sides were born in Ireland and his step-father, who is a doctor in Ealing, was in fact born in Ballina.

Patten made it quite clear to me that if we ever felt he could be of assistance to us at the Research Office we should not hesitate to get in touch with him and he would only be too delighted to do what he could to help.

Patten said - a view which is generally held here at the moment - that he did not expect a General Election until early '78. He was pretty confident that the Tories would win this election but was rather worried about the attitude of some members of the Shadow Cabinet who seemed to take the view that all they had to do was coast for the next 12 months and they would still be automatically returned to power by the electorate. This was a very dangerous assumption but, given the calibre of some of the Shadow Cabinet material, he was not very hopeful about achieving an improved performance, at least in the immediate future. I asked

about the position of Ted Heath in the Party and he replied that, while he had a great affection for both Mrs Thatcher and Mr Heath (I suspect it is greater for the previous leader of the Party), he did not see Mrs Thatcher inviting Heath back on to the front-bench, either before or after the next General Election. If the Tories were returned to power, he expected Peter Carrington to be the next Foreign Secretary. (It was not of course possible to have a Shadow Foreign Secretary who was sitting in the Lords.) He himself had received the party nomination for the Bath constituency for the next election. This had a Tory majority of over 2,000 at the last election and should give Patten an easy victory at the next contest. If elected, he will resign his position as Director of the Research Office as he doesn't think it would be possible to combine his duties in the House with those in the Research Office.

He spoke at some length about the Devolution Bill and said he thought the Government would now have less difficulty than he originally anticipated in getting the Bill on to the Statute Book. He also foresaw the referenda in Scotland and Wales going in favour of devolution though the poll in Wales would be very low. He himself ^{had} argued very strongly for a more positive and sympathetic response from the Shadow Cabinet to the Government's proposals but was over-ruled. He was also in favour of the Shadow Cabinet supporting a PR system of voting for the Assembly elections and to some extent - in so far as the Tories had allowed a free vote on this - has had some endorsement for his views. Overall, while he accepts that a Devolution Bill of this kind was necessary, he believes that the scheme may prove to be unworkable and that in the long run the only logical and workable solution will be federalism (which he would favour) or independence.

As regards Conservative policy on Northern Ireland, Patten told me that this is hardly ever discussed in the Shadow Cabinet and tends to be handled almost exclusively by Neave, Biggs-Davison and John Houston. I formed the impression that Patten does not particularly like Biggs-Davison

and he seems also to have very little intellectual regard for Neave. He did emphasise however that the latter was very close to Mrs Thatcher and would have to be accommodated in the Cabinet if they win the next election. He also told me that Whitelaw was not really pulling his weight in the Shadow Cabinet and did not seem any longer to be particularly interested in Northern Ireland affairs. Interestingly, he has considerable regard for Houston's ability, particularly on paper, and feels he has had a positive influence on Neave and Biggs-Davison.

Patten next said he understood I was a friend of Patrick Cosgrave and went on to wonder aloud if anything could be done to help him, as he was now drinking very heavily and producing no material of any substance or quality. He doubted if Mrs Thatcher would retain him much longer in her Private Office though this might depend of course on his contract. His standing was however now very low right through the whole Shadow Cabinet.

Finally, I might mention that Patten is quite a close friend of people like Tim Sheehy of the BIA and Hugo Young, the Political Editor of the Sunday Times, through his position as a member of the Council of the Catholic Institute for International Relations.

Dermot Gallagher

Dermot Gallagher
Press and Information Counsellor -