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AMBASSADE D'IRLANDE

LONDON

| June 1979

*Mr Ruan
Please cc Anglo
JRS 18/7/79*

Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

Attention : Mr Patrick Walshe, Information Section

I wish to report for the information of the Department, that when recently in the House of Commons I had a lengthy conversation with Kevin McNamara, MP. and a shorter one with Gerry Fitt MP, in the company of McNamara.

The Department will be aware that there has been speculation in the press that the Labour Party, recently defeated in the General Election, will now take a turn towards the left. McNamara, who is a member of the Left Wing Tribune Group, disagrees with this analysis. Those voters who had previously been Labour supporters and had given their support to the Conservatives in the recent election were, in his view, moderates in Labour Party terms rather than supporters of the Left Wing of the Party. They had, he thought, in some instances at least, been frightened by what they saw as increasing Left Wing control of the constituency associations of the Labour Party. Many of them were skilled workers. McNamara, added that these views were widely shared among Labour MPs, who now thought that extreme Left Wing policies rather than encouraging these "defectors" back into the Labour fold would serve only to confirm them in their support for the Conservative Party. He thought it unlikely therefore that the call for more extreme Left Wing policies, on the grounds that only "more socialism" can give the Labour opposition a chance of winning the next General Election, would attract majority support within the Parliamentary Labour Party. It is possible however that the National Executive

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Committee, which is to the left of the Parliamentary Party, and the forthcoming Annual Conference of the Party in the Autumn, will disagree with the above analysis and that demands will be made for a more ideological and less pragmatic approach than heretofore.

Insofar as the leadership of the Party is concerned, McNamara said that in theory Callaghan could remain leader for as long as he wishes. He did not detect any widespread opposition within the ranks of the Parliamentary Labour Party to the leadership of Callaghan. However, he thought that Callaghan himself would probably wish to step down in a year to eighteen months. Denis Healey still remained the most obvious successor at present. McNamara discounted the view that Benn had improved his chances of becoming leader by refusing a position in the Shadow Cabinet and by returning to the backbenches. This McNamara saw as a sign of weakness on Benn's part. It is better, he said, to fight and lose rather than refuse to fight. Benn has little support in the Parliamentary Party and is not a member of the Tribune Group. There have been attempts, however, the most recent of which was a motion at the last Labour Party Conference, to have the leader of the Parliamentary Party elected not by the Parliamentary Party as at present but by the delegates to the Annual Conference and there is evidence to believe that there is some support for having an electoral college which would be responsible for choosing and for discussing the leader. Such a college would be composed of representatives of the Parliamentary Party, of the National Executive Committee and of Annual Conference. It may be that one of the reasons why Benn resigned from the Front Bench is because he foresees changes in the method of election of the leader. If so he could very well have made a tactical error as it seems most unlikely, at least in the foreseeable future that the Parliamentary Party will be forced to give up its powers in these matters. McNamara added, and this is a view shared by other Left Wing Labour M.Ps, that John Silkin was a more likely left wing candidate for the leadership than Benn and this was due in no small measure to his handling of the agricultural portfolio when in Government. However, given the relative weakness of the Left Wing in the Parliamentary Labour Party (the membership of the Manifesto group being much

larger than that of the Tribune Group) it seems unlikely that an extreme Left candidate for the leadership would have anything more than an outside chance as long as there are no changes in the manner of the election of the leader.

McNamara was very pessimistic about the situation in Northern Ireland. The conclusions of the Bennett Report drew a question mark over the operations of the interrogation system in the North and he was very concerned that so many of those in Long Kesh were there as a result of confessions obtained during interrogation. He saw no possibility at present of getting the legitimate political leaders in Northern Ireland to agree on any form of devolved Government. In this situation, he wondered if it would not be best, in view of Unionist intransigence and in view of the costs to Britain of their presence in Northern Ireland, to withdraw and to put an end to both military and financial commitments in the North.

McNamara's views were broadly similar to the views expressed by Leo Abse, the Labour MP for Pontypool, in a speech in the House of Commons on the 18th May (copy attached) when he said that:

Unless the people of Ulster come together themselves, then ere long, the so far suppressed majority belief of the British people that the troops should return and the subventions end will become so overt and compelling that no collusion of the leadership in the established parties will be able to resist the legitimate pressures of our people.

Mr Fitt, whom McNamara and I met in the Commons Bar, expressed himself as very annoyed with the remarks which the Taoiseach is reported to have made in Cork on the 6th May about the approach of the previous Labour Government to the European Community. Fitt declared himself to be increasingly anti-EEC and said that he considers it most inappropriate that the Callaghan Government should have been criticised in this way after they had been defeated in the General Election.

He repeated, as he has been widely reported in the press, that he had fully supported Austin Currie in his bid to win the Westminster seat of Fermanagh South Tyrone. Unless the SDLP agreed to reinstate Currie it was his belief that it would fall apart and he hinted, though not perhaps totally in earnest, that he would leave the SDLP should Seamus Mallon and other "rural" elements in the SDLP succeed in keeping Currie out. Fitt was particularly vituperative about John Hume's position with regard to Currie saying that Hume had "sat on the fence in his typical fashion." As regards Hume's chances in the EEC election, Fitt thought they were still good though it was by no means certain that he would win a seat. Hume had told him that he expected to pick up half Maguire's votes in Fermanagh South Tyrone and while Bernadette Devlin-McAliskey and Paddy Devlin would take some votes away from him, the collapse of the Republican clubs in the last general election should be of assistance to Hume.

Fitt did not have much to say about the SDLP meeting with the Secretary of State Humphrey Atkins. He said that Atkins had spent most of the meeting listening carefully to what the SDLP had to say. Unlike Roy Mason, he did not appear to Fitt to be arrogant. Fitt said that the SDLP delegation said to Atkins that the British Government should withdraw its guarantee to the Unionists. He added, in jest, though perhaps also with a hint of relief, that he was glad that Atkins had not asked them what they meant by the guarantee to the Unionists as they would not have been able to reply.

Fitt said that he thought that talk of a British withdrawal was very dangerous. He was surprised that there had been no "Protestant backlash" to recent Provisional violence and said that if the British troops withdraw, Belfast in particular, and perhaps other places in the North would be engulfed in a brutal civil war.

Dáithí Ó Ceallaigh

Dáithí Ó Ceallaigh
Press and Information Officer

cc Mr Hugh Swift
Anglo Irish Division.