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Taoiseach

To see please. The

comments on tensions between
the P.M. and Mr Prior
are interesting

Mr Delaney

Mr Burke

Mr Murphy 2/11

15
3
82

7 & 1/2
24/3

11 March 1982

2213

Mr Whalley

Mr Ware

Mr V. Stuenkel (on return)

183 82

Dear Margaret

I wish to report that I had lunch yesterday with Alastair Cooke of the Conservative Research Department. Cooke, among his other responsibilities, provides briefing material for MPs and others on the Government's Northern Ireland policies. As well as his duties as Northern Ireland desk officer he has also in recent months, because of cut backs in the Research Department's staff, been burdened with responsibilities for Education, a subject for which he freely admits to having neither liking nor interest. He has contact with the Secretary of State, Mr Prior, from time to time and is much relied upon by back benchers for briefs, etc. While less influential when in Government than in opposition Cook is nonetheless well informed on Government policy. He is in a particularly good position to know of backbench views.

Cooke described the recent Cabinet OD Committee meeting at which Mr Prior presented his outline proposals for devolution in Northern Ireland as a stormy one. The instigator was the Prime Minister and Cooke said it is widely known in Westminster that she offered little support to Mr Prior in his efforts and showed her displeasure quite clearly. Cooke traces her reaction to two causes.

There is firstly the well documented personal antagonism between the two strong personalities. The Prime Minister views Mr Prior as a wet and Heath hang over whom she exiled to Northern Ireland, far from the central economic ministries where he had opposed her consistently. He is also seen as a potential threat to her leadership should he ever get a chance to mount a plausible attack on her position.

But Cooke thought this was not the principal reason for Mrs Thatcher's negative response to Mr Prior's outline proposals for a devolved assembly in Northern Ireland. The real answer, in his view, is to be found in the way in which the Prime Minister's own views have changed. Whereas in late 1979 it was she who urged the then Secretary of State Humphrey Atkins into talks with the parties in Northern Ireland, the aim of which was a devolved assembly, she now is of the

opinion that the policy best followed by the Government at this stage is one which leads to closer integration between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

Cooke stressed that this major and important change in the Prime Minister's position is due not to any fundamental and thought out philosophical shift in her approach. Indeed he thought that were circumstances and advisors different she could again change course. He claimed it was due almost entirely to the influence of Ian Gow, MP for Eastbourne and her Parliamentary Private Secretary.

Gow was Secretary of the Conservative Back Bench Northern Ireland Committee between 1975 and 1979. He was close to the late Airey Neave, who had first introduced him into Mrs Thatcher's inner circle. He would probably have become second in command at the Northern Ireland Office had Mr Neave lived to become Secretary of State. Cooke claims Gow is in favour of integration because firstly he is a nationalist (and there are many) who would see the loss of Northern Ireland as a severe blow to national morale and national interests and because secondly he feels that were there to be a devolved assembly in Northern Ireland it would increase the pressure for devolution in Scotland and Wales. Gow was a central figure in Conservative attempts to hinder the devolution process for Scotland and Wales during the period of the last Labour Government, and is, like most Conservatives, passionately opposed to devolution within Britain.

Cooke's arguments in this matter are interesting. Cooke is himself strongly committed to the maintenance of the Union, and, as has been reported in previous correspondence, he is and has been highly sceptical of the prospects for any devolved institution in Northern Ireland. He is usually very well informed. It is widely known that there were differences between the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State when the latter presented his plans and Cooke's explanation of the origin of these differences could well be correct. The Prime Minister's objections were not of course couched in such stark terms but, as I understand it, were directed more to the issue of whether the devolution plans would or would not be acceptable to the parties.

Cooke thought that in the final analysis Mrs Thatcher's acceptance of ideas expressed by her Parliamentary Private Secretary would not be absolute and that if the Secretary of State came up with a package which would find support from a broad spectrum of political opinion in Northern Ireland then she would not stand in his way. However, she was unlikely to give any plans for devolution her wholehearted support and this could have effect, particularly on the Conservative back benches.

Cooke was unable to forecast how many Conservative back benchers would underline their anti-devolution opinions to the extent of abstention or of opposition to a Government Bill proposing devolved Northern Ireland institutions. There are a number of MPs, such as Sir John Biggs-Davison, who are passionately opposed to anything which might threaten the union. Cooke thought they are reasonably influential within the party. Should Molyneaux, who was once very close to Conservatives, and Powell, press strongly against devolution and in favour of integration this might also have an effect. In circumstances where the Prime Minister was known to be lukewarm it could happen that a number of Conservative back benchers would abstain on the legislation or possibly vote against.

However, in Cooke's judgment the problems caused by such a revolt would only be minor ones. He gave two reasons for this. Firstly, the majority of Conservative MPs want to avoid Irish affairs and would be prepared to back whatever proposals the Government puts forward. Secondly, it is highly unlikely that the Labour opposition would do anything other than support Mr Prior in the lobbies. There is not therefore any realistic hope among the opponents of devolution that they could defeat the Government.

With regard to the details of the Prior proposals Cooke had nothing new to add. His information confirms what has previously been reported to the Department.

He was hesitant about the possibilities of having an effective Anglo-Irish Parliamentary tier to the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council in which Northern Ireland politicians would participate. The general lack of interest in Irish affairs among MPs applied equally in this instance. The Prime Minister herself in his view has serious doubts and seems unprepared, at least at this stage, to encourage Parliament to set matters in motion. There are some MPs who see it as a possible back door to an Irish dimension and would consequently be antagonistic to its establishment. Were there to be a Unionist outcry about it that opposition would increase. In such circumstances even those MPs who strongly supported Mr Prior's attempts to establish a devolved assembly might hesitate about an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary tier. Ultimately he thought the same criteria would apply here as in the matter of devolution - it would win through with Labour support.

Cooke had little to add to what we know of the Government's attitude to the renewal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act except to forecast correctly that

there would be a review. The Department will recall that on 25th February during Northern Ireland Questions Mr Prior hinted there might be a review of the operation of the Northern Ireland Emergency Provisions Act. Cooke thought such a review certain and felt an announcement might be made within the next week.

He spoke highly of security co-operation between the Gardai and the RUC and is gratified at the successes achieved by both forces in recent months.

Yours sincerely

Daithí

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Press and Information Officer

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Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs

c.c. Mr Sean Whelan, Press Section