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Confidential

21st March 1984

Discussion between the Minister for Foreign Affairs and
Dr David Owen in London, 15th March 1984

Dear Assistant Secretary

I enclose herewith a short report on the Minister's meeting with Dr Owen during his visit to London on 15th March 1984.

Yours sincerely

Noel Dorr
Ambassador

Mr Michael Lillis
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin 2

Encl

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5/2/11

Meeting between the Minister for Foreign Affairs and
Dr David Owen in London, 15th March, 1984.

In the course of his visit to London the Minister called to see Dr David Owen in his Office in Westminster (Norman Shaw Building). The meeting lasted about half an hour. Dr Owen as on the occasion of his meeting last November with the Taoiseach and the Minister was impressive in his analysis of the political situation here. He was also rather friendly and on-coming and indeed he seemed at times to have cast himself in the role of a friendly and honest adviser to the Minister.

Dr Owen said that Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister is really central to any consideration of whether there could be movement by the Government in relation to Northern Ireland. Despite what the newspapers may say about "banana skins" and a certain fraying of her success since the general election in June last year he did not believe that she had really been weakened in any way. It was plain indeed that though he may be an opponent, Dr Owen has a certain fascination, not to say admiration, for Mrs Thatcher.

In Owen's view Mrs Thatcher has about 35-40 back-benchers who could be a problem to her on the Northern Ireland issue. In his view she is also mesmerized by Enoch Powell. She basked in his approval at the time of the Falklands war and, in a psychological sense, he is still for her a kind of Conservative "conscience" - that is to say someone whose judgement of her she regards as very important.

Owen takes very seriously the possibility that Mrs Thatcher at some stage will really decide to do something about Northern Ireland - that is to say she will get "stuck into" the problem. If she does do this, in Owen's view, her first move would be to change Secretaries of State and put someone like say Ian Gow in to replace Prior. (Gow is a hard-liner). Owen said he likes Prior - but he sees Prior's role as that of capable management of the Northern Ireland problem. So long as he is in the post it can be taken that Mrs Thatcher has not yet decided to act. If, on the other hand, she were to decide - as Owen thinks she might - to face down her potential back-bench critics, she would need someone like Gow to guard her back.

"Getting stuck into the problem" would also mean of course facing down the Unionists to some extent. Here Owen saw a certain limited analogy with Rhodesia. In that case British policy since the mid-1960s had been to limit its proposals to what would be seen as tolerable to Ian Smith. Owen himself said he had at least reversed that policy when he was Foreign Secretary about 1977 - though he had not been there long enough to move forward to a settlement. He saw an analogy with this in the case of Northern

Ireland where Britain has always tailored its policy in the ultimate to what Unionist opinion would find tolerable.

Owen admitted frankly that during his own time as Foreign Secretary in the Callaghan Government the British Government had simply no policy on Northern Ireland whatever except to manage the problem. Admittedly of course they had had a thin majority in Parliament. The role of Roy Mason as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was simply to bring some improvement in the economic field.

Owen repeated that if Mrs Thatcher decided, as he thought she might at some stage, to really turn her mind to the Northern Ireland problem she could be very tenacious about it. He recalled that after the Rhodesia settlement had been worked out it had been she who held firm against the faint-hearted Foreign Office when it became clear that Mugabe was likely to win the elections.

As to the commission being established to work out a policy on Northern Ireland for the Alliance Parties (SDP and Liberal) Owen said they had now got the agreement of Lord Donaldson to Chair the Commission.

Towards the end of the discussion Owen said that while he knew that the concept would not be very acceptable to the Minister, he had to say that he himself thought it probable that Ireland would eventually have to come to terms with the defence question in the context of Northern Ireland and also in relation to the development of Europe.

Comment

While Owen may not perhaps be quite as friendly to us as he seems it does appear from this discussion with the Minister and from his previous discussion with the Taoiseach in November that he is both well disposed to our viewpoint and genuinely very concerned about the Northern Ireland question. In his speech at his party's Conference last Autumn his tone suggested support for the Alliance Party in Northern Ireland. He said nothing about this to the Minister however.

In general Owen struck me as having a sharp and incisive political intelligence. I felt too that he would be supportive of any settlement which might be reached between the two Governments and that he would not be likely to play politics with the issue.

Wm

21 March 1984