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March, 1992.

Mr. Sean O hUiginn,  
Assistant Secretary,  
Anglo-Irish Division,  
Department of Foreign Affairs,  
Dublin.

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24/3

The General Election - Scenarios for a hung parliament

Dear Assistant Secretary,

Shortly before the election was called David Trimble participated in a closed seminar at the London School of Economics on the prospects for British politics with a hung parliament. Others who took part in the day long seminar were Oxford academics Vernon Bogdanor and David Butler - foremost experts on the mechanics of hung parliaments, senior journalists fronting election night TV and radio coverage and a cross section of politicians. Mainly for their own records, the LSE took a verbatim transcript of the proceedings. I was given sight of this last week by Professor Patrick Dunleavy who organised the event. In the light of the continuing speculation here about the possibility of a hung parliament and Unionist statements at last weekend's meeting of the Ulster Unionist Council the following comments from the LSE seminar will be of interest.

Basic scenarios

British academics have produced several complicated scenarios for a hung parliament divided between those where the Conservatives are the largest single party, where Labour has a majority and where both parties are equal. For the sake of simplicity these can be broken down roughly as follows:

- Both major parties with an equality of seats - 300 each - and the smaller parties with 51 including 26 for the Liberal Democrats. This would be the dream outcome for Paddy Ashdown, enabling him to do a deal with either Conservatives or Labour.
- A more probable scenario is where one of the two major parties get between 305 and 315. (The winning post is 326). In this instance, the Liberal Democrats acting alone could deliver a clear majority to one side but not to the other.

- The third scenario is where the Conservatives or Labour get about 320 seats, just short of a majority. This is the one which would offer the best opportunity to the Unionists allowing, for example, the OUP, with or without the DUP, and possibly Jim Kilfedder to support a minority Conservative Government.
- Another possible, more complex outcome, mirroring the situation in March 1974, would be where no one of the smaller parties, including the Liberal Democrats, acting alone could provide sufficient support to either of the major parties. This would require a combination of the smaller parties to act in concert to support a minority Government.

#### Unionist views

Trimble told the LSE seminar that Unionist attitudes are conditioned by the memory of 1974. Consequently, he said, "our formal position which we trot out is that in a hung parliament we would have to seriously consider whether we should act so as to bring the parliament to a premature end and that, I suppose, is an inducement for whoever is in the Government at the time to offer us a series of little minor concessions each time a serious vote comes up." This, taken with other comments by Trimble, suggest that the OUP envisage a situation where their support for the Queens speech, and every subsequent serious vote, will have to be bargained for - a clear signal to the Tories of the high costs of any deal with the Unionists.

Trimble went on to speak of "the considerable rivalry" between the OUP and DUP. "There's a very serious doubt as to whether the Ulster Unionists could afford to enter into an arrangement with any party unless we had tied in the DUP as well, because if you have an arrangement with some other party, whatever the arrangement might be, occasionally you're going to have to do things which may not be popular on the ground and our rivals, if they're free to criticise and attack us, could make life embarrassing for us, particularly if, as in 1974, there was going to be a second election in the short term. From our point of view we would have to protect our flank with the DUP."

However later in the meeting he went on to make the point that the basic interests of the OUP and DUP are the same commenting that "I'd have thought our need to keep the DUP on board in some way or other may have more impact on the major parties as they tend to different perceptions of the two groups."

Commenting on the possibility of a Queens speech presented by a minority Conservative Government being voted down by the smaller parties including the Unionists Trimble, according to the LSE transcript, stated bluntly; "They won't. If we were to go through the lobby against the Queens speech that precipitates a general election and destroys the goose that's going to lay the golden egg." Turning to his fellow panellists John Biffen (former leader of the House) and Austin Mitchell, Labour MP for Grimsby, he enquired rhetorically; "They'll want to preserve the hung parliament won't they?"

From Trimble's comments it is clear that if the Unionists offer crucial support to a minority Conservative Government in the vote on the Queens speech, they would expect it to carry on and not opt for the quick fix of an autumn tie breaker election following the precedent set by Harold Wilson's minority Government of February 1974. "I don't agree" he said "that they (the Conservatives) would have the realistic option of a second election that year, because isn't the likelihood that they would be perceived as having lost the election? Isn't the likelihood then that their position in the opinion polls would drop, and that in a second election, later in the year, the Conservatives would lose. A quick second election is a Labour option, not a Conservative option."

As to the possibility of doing a deal with the Labour party he stated; "You have the curious situation that while we have considerable bad memories of the present Conservative administration, the sort of demands that we would be making of them are on matters that are peripheral to them. They are not that hung-up on the Anglo-Irish Agreement now. Whereas when you look at the Labour party, the official policy of the Labour party is something that's anathema to us." Turning to Austin Mitchell he remarked with his usual good grace - "it's the only policy you haven't ditched yet!"

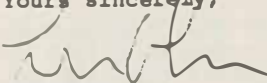
#### Possible modalities

A number of other points of interest arose. The seminar noted that even in a hung parliament situation a Prime Minister, particularly if his party were the largest, had a fair degree of latitude in attempting to form a government. There would be no vacancy until John Major resigned. Once however that happened Neil Kinnock would be asked to form a government - not a majority government, simply a government. The consensus view among the academics at least is that unless the Conservative shortfall is very close the hung parliament outcome will tend toward favouring the formation of a minority Labour government.

All were in agreement that what matters in a hung parliament situation is not what the minor parties hope will happen but what the major parties do. They have much more room for manoeuvre, are in the dominant position when it comes to initiatives and in choosing to whom to speak. One should therefore think more in terms of the power of the major parties to dictate the course of events rather than seeking to view things from the very limited perspective of the minor parties.

It was also agreed that in terms of distribution of seats and votes very little separated the various scenarios. Very limited changes could dramatically alter the tactical nature of each outcome. Even therefore if the polls are accurate to within 1% it will not be possible to predict in advance with any accuracy which scenario is likely to arise. It is nonetheless worth noting that of the 36 polls published between 1 November and 1 March, 29 have pointed to a hung parliament as the most likely outcome.

Yours sincerely,



Joe Hayes  
Counsellor