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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

17 Grosvenor Place,  
London SW1X 7HR.

27 October, 1992.

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

Some background on Conservative divisions over the Maastricht Bill

Dear Assistant Secretary,

I attended a dinner at the Reform Club on 22 October for the new DPP, Barbara Mills, at which there were a number of MPs and party activists from both sides of the House. That morning the Cabinet had considered the Prime Minister's plan to introduce the Committee stage of the European Communities (Amendment) Bill on 4 November. He had gone around the table one by one to secure the backing of his 22 colleagues and he told them of his determination to call a General Election in the event of the Government being defeated. Some points which arose in conversation at our dinner will give a flavour of current developments here.

Strain on the Prime Minister

There has been much comment in recent days here about the suggestion first aired by Simon Jenkins in his column in "The Times" to the effect that the Prime Minister underwent some kind of minor nervous breakdown on 16 September - the so-called "Black Wednesday" when sterling slipped out of the ERM. Westminster has been buzzing with rumours to the effect that Mr. Major is not up to coping with the stress of the successive political crises which have beset him since the summer recess. Several MPs, including even loyal Tories, openly talk about tell-tale signs of the physical toll which the strain of events are allegedly taking on him. It is said, for example, that he has lost a great deal of weight, has become remarkably sensitive to media criticism and has become increasingly irritable with staff in Downing Street.

Most serious-minded MPs concede, however, that the Prime Minister has probably coped a great deal better with recent events than the media, including the Tory tabloids, give him credit for. He has made clear, for example, his determination to face down Tory Euro-dissidents although there are many who would question the wisdom of the apparent do or die approach which he now seems to have committed himself to. After Thursday's Cabinet meeting, his Press Secretary, Gus O'Donnell and others in the Downing Street inner circle began to brief correspondents, in particular, those who accompanied the Prime Minister on the weekend trip to Egypt for the 50th anniversary of the battle of El Alamein - a fitting historical context - on the high risk

strategy which the Prime Minister is now committed to. Since then he has steadfastly refused to disown or back down from the line that defeat on the vote on a motion to reintroduce the Bill will resort in his seeking a dissolution of Parliament. It should be said, however, that at time of writing, there are some small signs that he may be getting ready to distance himself from this strategy particularly if there is any doubt in the Whips Office about the certainty of a victory on November 4. The direction of events will become clearer in the course of the week as the members of the influential 1922 Committee of backbenchers make known their views.

So far, his Cabinet colleagues have voiced their support for the Prime Minister's hardline approach. Privately, however, there are several Tories who doubt the wisdom of an all or nothing assault on the Tory rebels. To many it smacks of ill-judged high-handedness which could add to the rebel ranks. On the Opposition benches, there are predictably many who express the view that, to borrow the colourful language of the ubiquitous John Prescott, "I think the man is losing his marbles". One way or another, the battle-lines are now clearly drawn between the Prime Minister and the Euro-phobes. The latter's strategy is to point the accusing finger exclusively at Mr. Major. They say that a Government defeat on Maastricht will not mean a General Election but it will mean a change of leader. The Prime Minister's response has been to widen the battle ground insisting that defeat on such an issue of principle must require an election. His Cabinet colleagues and others close to him are also making it clear to the rebels that if they are hoping for John Major's replacement, they should be clear that none of his potential successors would give anything other than a total commitment to Maastricht. They also warn that a Government defeat in an election would mean a Labour Government even more committed to Europe.

### Labour

One of those whom I sat beside at the Reform dinner was Mary Ramsey, a former FCO official from Glasgow whom John Smith has just appointed as his foreign policy adviser. She told me that the Shadow Cabinet are now openly giving thanks that they are not in office at this difficult time. It would have been a bitter pill for a Labour leader to have presided over the sterling crisis marking Labour for all time as the party of devaluation. To have had to cope with the pit closures would have been the ultimate nightmare.

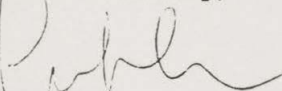
The speedy return of the Maastricht Bill to the House poses, however, its own particular dilemma for John Smith. There are an increasing number of the PLP and the Shadow Cabinet who feel that November 4 offers too good an opportunity to pass up simply to demonstrate Labour's new European credentials. Jack Cunningham, the Shadow Foreign Secretary is, for example, putting it about that the Committee stage of the Maastricht Bill should be delayed until after the Danish position is clear. John Prescott feels the November 4 motion can only be seen as a motion of confidence in the Government and as such it must be Labour's task to oppose it. For once, there are many on all sides of the party who share Prescott's views. As against this, Mary Ramsey reminded me of John Smith's strong pro-European record including the fact that in 1972 he defied a three-line Whip to support Britain's entry into the EEC. If, however, the vote on November 4 turns out to be a question of the Government's survival, then it is hard to see how a Labour Opposition can use its votes to defend a Conservative Prime Minister against his own backbenchers even on an issue like Maastricht.

Another important factor of course is the position of the Liberal Democrats. They are likely to support the Government thereby reducing the pressure somewhat. Their support would effectively increase the Government's majority from 21 to 59 and require at least 30 Conservative rebels to ensure a Government defeat.

The media have conflicting calculations on the number of Tory rebels. In reality, it is virtually impossible to quantify with any precision their potential strength including a breakdown of those who, whatever the cost, would vote against the Government, those who might abstain and the waverers whom the heavy hand of the Whips will finally shepherd into the fold. On the emotional issue of the pit closures, at the end of the day only 6 Tory MPs voted against the Government and 8 abstained. On an issue like Maastricht, the numbers are likely to be substantially higher although they may not be quite as high as the media would lead one to expect.

One fear in the Whips Office is an incremental effect from the cumulative level of dissatisfaction arising from the succession of crises which have beset this Government. One potentially ominous sign was the fact that within hours of Thursday's Cabinet meeting, the Executive of the 1922 Committee held a special meeting. At this meeting the vast majority of those who spoke were strongly in favour of putting the Maastricht Bill on hold. There are also many in the 1922 Committee who would strongly resent the Prime Minister's tactics of seeking to frighten the Tory rebels with the threat of a General Election. As was the case with the controversy over the pits closure, it is possible over the coming days that this Committee and other powerful voices in the Conservative party will seek to soften the Prime Minister's approach and engineer a non-substantive motion on November 4 thereby preventing a high-noon style confrontation between the Government and the dissidents. This way the Government will have survived yet another crisis and "turkeys will not have been obliged to vote for Christmas". In so doing, however, the Prime Minister will be seen to have made yet another u-turn. It is a matter for debate as to how many policy shifts his party will allow him to make before deciding that his leadership has become chronically weak.

Yours sincerely,



Joe Hayes

c.c. Asst. Sec. Fahey.