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CONFIDENTIAL

29 January 1992

Mr Seán Ó hUiginn
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

Mr McCarthy
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VISIT OF JOHN CHILCOT TO THE U.S.

Dear Assistant Secretary

Chilcot's programme and public approach

1. As indicated in advance, I had a private lunch yesterday with John Chilcot, the Permanent Secretary of the Northern Ireland Office. Chilcot is on a visit to Washington, New York and Boston this week with a view, to paraphrase his own words, of getting a sense of the U.S. dimension to the North and Anglo-Irish relations.

2. During his visit to Washington, Chilcot was not to our knowledge received by any politicians, though the British Embassy had requested calls on his behalf to (at least) the Speaker and Senator Kennedy. Overall, the programme arranged for Chilcot by the Embassy was quite unimpressive; the principal guest, for instance, at a lunch hosted in his honour by the British Ambassador was Brian Atwood who, as President of the National Democratic Institute, had in the past been helpful with funding for the SDLP. (The National Democratic Institute, which is funded at one remove by Congress, has a mandate to bolster political parties in areas

of the world where democracy is under threat, from either the Left or the Right. The SDLP some years ago was criticised for accepting funding from the NDI, on the grounds that the Institute was reputed to have links to the CIA).

3. Neither did Chilcot seem to have any specific message to convey. At a press breakfast in the British Embassy yesterday morning (attended by five journalists, of whom only two were of any consequence), his emphasis was on the determination of the British Government not to allow the recent upsurge in violence to deflect them from their present policy and approach. After an initial presentation, he went on to answer a range of questions in a very general manner; in doing so, he seemed to go out of his way to avoid commenting on political parties or personalities in the North, apart from - something which is almost obligatory here - paying a tribute to the political thinking and personal courage of John Hume.

Peter Brooke

4. Chilcot, who in passing said he thought it increasingly likely that the Tories would win the next election with a small majority, saw little possibility of Peter Brooke staying on as Secretary of State in a new Conservative Cabinet. He added that, given the enormous strains associated with the job, it would be unfair to ask any one politician to continue in office for much longer than the three years which Mr Brooke has already served. He thought it very possible that, if the Tories were to win, Peter Brooke would be asked to become the party's nominee for Speaker.

5. In taking the above view, Chilcot said that Mr Brooke's Late Late Show lapse of judgment was inevitably a factor in the argument

for change. The Secretary of State, who was accompanied on the trip to Dublin by Andy Wood, the NIO Press Officer, should with hindsight have cancelled his appearance on the show. The error of judgment was compounded by the decision to stay on for the rugby match on the Saturday.

6. Chilcot went on, however, to place much of the blame for Mr Brooke's misjudgment at the feet of Gay Byrne. He made the point that it had been agreed in advance that there would be no reference on the programme to the Secretary of State's first marriage. In the event, when Mr Brooke was asked by Byrne about his present wife's attitude to the first marriage, the Secretary of State had an almost complete "blank" and was unable, as a result, to handle or think through the implications of the invitation to sing, which followed immediately.

Possible successors to Mr Brooke

7. Chilcot saw the Attorney-General, Paddy Mayhew, as the most likely successor. He had an Irish background (it might perhaps be more correctly called Southern Unionist!), was a reasonably good lawyer who could read a brief quickly and well and, an important attribute when dealing with Northern politicians, had a quick sense of humour. His firm line on security issues, as Attorney, might moreover make him more acceptable than most politicians to the Unionists. Finally, and most importantly, Mayhew was one of the few fairly weighty politicians known to be personally anxious to take on the post.

8. Apart from Mayhew, the other likely candidate was John Patten, the junior Minister at the Home Office. If appointed, he would be the first Catholic to hold the post.

9. Chilcot added that, in his personal view, the ideal appointment would be Chris Patten, the Chairman of the Tory Party, but the reality unfortunately was that he was too senior a figure to be given such a non-central portfolio.

SDLP

10. Chilcot was quite critical of the SDLP and, in particular, the party's failure to go after the West Belfast seat in any serious or structured way. He wondered aloud if Hume's presumed (Derry) antipathy towards Belfast, and his wariness about the possibility of a strong (successor?) figure emerging in that city, might be a factor in the party's apparent unwillingness to take on Gerry Adams.

11. He was also surprised that the SDLP did not make a more serious and structured effort to raise funds in the United States; in this regard, he cited a view conveyed to him by Atwood of the NDI (see para. 2 above) that many in the United States, who could be helpful to the SDLP, believed that the party had some years ago overcome their financial problems and were no longer in need of substantial funding from here.

Unionists

12. Chilcot was pleased with the outcome of the Secretary of State's meeting with the Northern Ireland leaders in Westminster on Monday, which had gone much better than he (Chilcot) had anticipated. A particular worry for Mr Brooke and the NIO had been that Paisley, for internal Unionist electoral purposes, would prove unwilling to go along with a consensus statement. In the event, however, he had been quite conciliatory and helpful.

13. Chilcot went on to say, however, that the Unionists, through their behaviour on the Brooke singing affair, had severely damaged themselves with cross-party opinion in Britain. The remarks in the House of Clifford Forsythe and Willie Ross had been in complete conflict with the atmosphere and sensitivity of the occasion and had led to sustained "stares of hatred" being directed at the Unionist benches from all sides. The damage caused to the Unionists as a result should not be underestimated, despite the best efforts of Peter Robinson to be calm and low-key in his approach.

The Future

14. Chilcot at this stage asked for my personal thoughts about the way forward if (as he presumed) John Major were returned to power. I took the opportunity offered to say (with a light touch) that Dublin and London perhaps differed somewhat in how we might see progress being best achieved. We understood and recognised that the traditional British approach to conflict problems was to believe that political progress could most effectively be achieved through an incremental process being built from the ground up, and we accepted, of course, that this approach had much merit and might well be the best way forward in many situations.

15. On the other hand, our own sense and experience of the Northern situation, fashioned over very many years, had led us to the belief that it was important that the two Governments should seek to arrive in advance at a shared concept of the structures required for an enduring settlement and should then go on to work together consciously and carefully to build the widest possible support for them. I thought it might be useful to reinforce this

message by saying to Chilcot that, given the present political view in the United States of the uniquely close relationship between London and Dublin (as reflected in cooperation under the Anglo-Irish Agreement and within the European Community), U.S. political leaders would, I believed, expect the two Governments to have a clear sense between them, in advance of negotiations, of what was ultimately required and how this might best be brought to fruition. It was our belief, in short, that leadership along the above general lines would need to be shown by the two Governments if real progress was to be achieved.

16. Chilcot neither agreed with nor dissented from the above thinking. He did say, however, that a bilateral strategy of this kind was never an option while Peter Brooke was Secretary of State. Mr Brooke would be politically quite incapable, and personally unwilling, to carry forward an initiative, and seek to sell it to (Northern) political and other leaders, on the basis of an agreed framework understanding, however sensible and attractive, between London and Dublin.

17. John Major on the other hand, if he were intellectually convinced of the soundness of the approach and believed it had more than a fifty per cent chance of success, would probably have no such reservations. Indeed, given his personality and approach, there could be no question of the Prime Minister becoming personally involved in the Northern process unless he had a clear idea of where he wanted to go. Major's handling of the Maastricht process was a good illustration of his negotiating style - he had set down clear objectives in advance (almost military style) but, within these overall parameters, had allowed his team sufficient flexibility on the detail to enable the obstacles that inevitably arose on a day to day basis to be overcome.

18. Overall, and if I had to give an overview, I would say I had the impression from Chilcot of someone who was intellectually open at this time to possible new options. He is undoubtedly pleased that the talks framework has been preserved but, almost instinctively, I also came away with the feeling that he believes there is a missing ingredient to the present process (this might, or might well not be an agreed London-Dublin understanding).

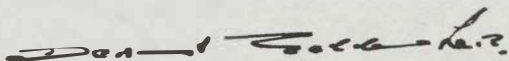
19. This sense of Chilcot's openness was also heightened by his introduction into our conversation at different times of views, which clearly intrigued him, from two very different sources. These were:

- (a) the views expressed by Peter Robinson in his extraordinary statement and press conference on the 29th October when he said, in the context of his view that Northern Ireland was being progressively moved towards a United Ireland, that "we should face the situation as it is, not how we would like it to be"; and, secondly and peculiarly,
- (b) remarks made privately to Chilcot on a recent occasion by a British Army officer of Wexford background - at present serving with the Royal Irish Regiment and who some years ago commanded a batallion of the UDR - to the effect that what Northern Ireland required above all else was leadership (i.e. as against the traditional incremental British approach to the problem). It seems odd that Chilcot should quote this remark but, possibly because (in innocence!) he believes that the officer's background and experience enables him to have a particular understanding of all three dimensions to the

Northern problem, the remark undoubtedly made a considerable impression.

20. Chilcot - who I should emphasise remained completely agnostic on the substance of what I might call the shared conceptual approach - made the point finally that any possibility of going down such a road would require a close working relationship between a small group on each side in London and Dublin and, most importantly, reciprocal conviction and courage at political level. Our discussion rested there. Given that I have known Chilcot personally for some time, and that he on occasion can be surprisingly frank and open in his thinking, I decided that I should report in detail on our conversation.

Yours sincerely



Dermot Gallagher
Ambassador