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CONFIDENTIAL

14 April, 1992.

Mr S. O hUiginn
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division.

Dear Assistant Secretary,

Conversation with Richard Ford, The Times, 13 April, 1992.

Ford is probably one of the best informed British journalists on Northern Ireland. He is a former Times' correspondent in Belfast and has retained a very considerable interest and a wide range of contacts on Northern Ireland issues. He made a number of points of interest:

Mayhew:

- He was amazed at the choice of Mayhew and speculated at length as to whether this signalled anything about Major's approach to Northern Ireland. Ford had lunch with Mayhew six weeks ago and he told me that in the course of their conversation, Mayhew exhibited a noticeable sympathy for unionist concerns - exclaiming at one point "did my colleagues really believe that they could get the Agreement through without causing serious trouble"? While Ford got the impression that Mayhew's instinctive sympathies were essentially unionist, at the same time, he detected an evident distaste on the part of Mayhew for the more extreme manifestations of sectarianism in Northern unionism - displaying what Ford described as "a typical Southern unionist distaste for Northern extremism".
- In the course of the lunch, Ford had quizzed Mayhew about his long-evident ambitions for the Northern Ireland post. While Mayhew did not seek to deny his ambitions, he told Ford that he felt that he was now too old (62) to be appointed. Ford felt that Mayhew had been sincere at the time and speculated that he must have been genuinely surprised at his elevation.

- Ford himself was equally surprised at the appointment. Downing Street have been briefing for some weeks that the Prime Minister is personally seized of the Northern Ireland issue. If this is the case, Ford felt that Major could clearly have signalled his interest by appointing one of younger members of his team - either John Patten or Michael Portillo; not someone like Mayhew who, at 62, must of necessity view this cabinet appointment as his last. He wondered whether this meant that Major's apparent interest in Northern Ireland had been a reflection of a pre-election calculation that the unionists might be a factor in a hung parliament and that, now that this is no longer significant, the issue can safely be placed once again on the back-burner.
- Ford also dwelt on Mayhew's own personality and bearing - being very much the high-Tory in his mannerisms - "an even greater high-Tory than Peter Brooke".

Overall, Ford was mystified by the choice of Mayhew and speculated on a number of possible motivations ranging from the "benign" to the "malign" -viz-

- that a high-Tory like Mayhew is the type who can carry sufficient weight to achieve progress in the talks;
- that Mayhew may have been chosen in order not to upset the unionists whose votes may eventually be useful should the Tories lose too many by-elections in the course of the current parliament;
- that at 62, Mayhew might be just the man to keep the seat warm for the Tory Party Chairman, Chris Patten, when he eventually re-enters the Commons and, presumably, the Cabinet.

Cabinet:

Ford felt that Major's new cabinet exhibited little evidence of a fundamental shake-up in the old team. Baker, King and Brooke were widely regarded as being on the way out and there were few surprises in the new appointments - both John Patten and Michael Portillo being widely tipped for promotion for some considerable time. Of the women appointed to the cabinet, Ford felt that Gillian Shephard is certainly talented and is the one to watch. However, he dismissed the appointment of Virginia Bottomley as "pure tokenism".

Labour:

With Kinnock's resignation, Ford felt that Labour should choose a new leader with the greatest of care - the tabloids will pursue any new leader with the same relentlessness as they pursued Kinnock. Any flaw, either personal or political, will be exposed. For this reason, he felt that Smith would be the wrong choice - "he was the man for the last election, not

for the next one". If Labour chose Smith, Ford predicted that Smith's health (he has had a heart by-pass) will be made into a crucial issue and will be examined and monitored in excruciating detail by the tabloids.

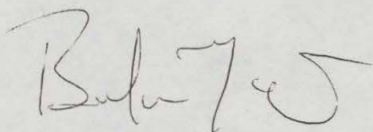
While he had no preferred candidate in mind, he felt that whoever is chosen must be "squeaky clean and tabloid resistant". (In that context, the only smear story to receive publicity in the course of the recent election concerned Paddy Ashdown. However, rumours abound in London about the sexual proclivities of a number of members of both the Conservative and Labour front benches. There was something of stand-off during the election and it is widely rumoured that the Tory tabloids were prevented from publishing any details on the Labour front-bench because the Mirror apparently made it clear that they were in possession of equally damaging material on a number of leading Tories!)

Scotland:

Ford was concerned at the possible effects in both the short and long term of 17 years unbroken Tory rule. He felt that this must inevitably led to a further growth of a sense of marginalisation in the traditional Labour strongholds in the North of England and Scotland. It is in Scotland where he felt that this sense is currently most acute.

While Major's strategy of standing by the Union may have shored-up the Tory vote in Scotland, nonetheless Tory sentiment is still very much in a minority (11 out of 72 seats). For the fourth time Scotland has voted largely for Labour and for the fourth time Labour have failed to deliver.

Ford's own instinct is that Major will move to address Scottish devolution in some form - "sufficient to give the Scots the illusion if not the reality of controlling their affairs". This is, of course, the benign scenario. He cautioned however that there is a malign scenario. If Major sticks to his guns and fails to address the issue Ford predicts a period of serious instability in Scottish politics with the Scottish Nationalists seriously damaging the dominant position of the Labour Party in Scottish politics - "a prospect which some Tories might not find displeasing".



Brendan McMahon
Press & Information Officer