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19 November, 1992.

Mr S. O hUiginn
Assistant Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division

Dear Assistant Secretary,

Conversation with Frank Millar, Irish Times.

As reported in Mr Hayes' secure fax of 13 November, notwithstanding official British Government denials of any deals between the Conservative Government and the Ulster Unionists, Millar is convinced that such a deal is on the cards. He sees the first hints of this in the UUP abstention on the recent Miners' vote and in the approaches made to the UUP prior to the recent crucial Maastricht vote in the House of Commons. In last Monday's edition of 16 November (copy attached), he reported on the increased speculation in Westminster about the possibilities of such a deal.

He told me that his UUP contacts were being unusually coy about the matter and were apparently embarrassed by his article which implied that they might be prepared to horse-trade their principles for political advantage. However, Millar is sticking to his story that Mayhew met with three Ulster Unionists, including Roy Beggs and Ken Maginnis, one hour before the Maastricht vote. His information is that Mayhew apparently made no offer on a Select Committee but confined his remarks to pointing out the dire consequences for Ulster Unionists of a negative vote on Maastricht - a Labour Government with Kevin McNamara as Secretary of State. The tactic did not work and the Ulster Unionists were effectively whipped into a negative vote by John Taylor.

In Millar's view, the recent crises have served to highlight the reality of John Major's narrow majority in the Commons. One result has been to make the Tories acutely aware of the advantages of somehow getting the UUP on-side; - either by way of supporting the Government or, failing that, by ensuring their abstention on crucial votes. This has stimulated a

renewed focus on the Unionist agenda - most notably on their traditional integrationist demand for a Commons Select Committee on Northern Ireland.

His own feeling is that the Tories will not make any precipitate offer on a Select Committee - especially if there is still some prospect of resuming the talks in some format. However, while Mayhew remains committed to resuming the process, Millar's information is that John Major has never shared Mayhew's optimism about the talks. With such a slim majority in the Commons, Millar speculated that he might be easily persuaded of the merits of an alternative approach to the problem of Northern Ireland.

Millar pointed out that the creation of a Select Committee is an issue which is unlikely to cause many ripples within the House of Commons. On its merits, it is difficult to argue against the proposal which can be characterised as ensuring enhanced democratic scrutiny over the Government of Northern Ireland. He felt that many within the Labour Party may well find the proposal attractive and pointed to the fact that Kate Hoey has already openly supported the proposal during the recent Northern Ireland debate in the Commons.

Millar's views are of course coloured by his perspective on the recent ending of the talks process. He is dismissive of any talk of a resumption of the process and believes that the initiative is now definitively over. He sees the end of the talks as heralding the eclipse of the devolutionist wing within the Ulster Unionist Party. He described Molyneux as exhibiting a quiet self-satisfaction; - "after all, notwithstanding his own scepticism about the process, he had allowed the process to move ahead and had put no impediment in its way. Now it has failed and his integrationist strategy has been vindicated".

Millar's assessment is that British policy will move to what he characterised as "two-way integration". By this he means that northern nationalists will have a level of integration with the rest of Ireland through the operation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement; while unionists will have an improved degree of integration with Britain by way of a Select Committee. He sees no necessary contradiction in this policy which might offer the British the opportunity of riding both horses at the same time. He speculated however that it might on occasion prove a bruising experience - especially if at some time in the future a Northern Ireland Select Committee should choose to quiz Ministers and officials about the agenda and discussions of meetings of the InterGovernmental Conference.

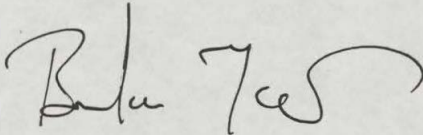
Comment:

It might be as well to be somewhat cautious about these reports of an imminent deal between the Tories and the Ulster

Unionists. In the context of Westminster, it is a speculative story which receives an airing periodically - especially whenever the Government's majority is under threat. When I spoke earlier this week with Des McCartan of the Belfast Telegraph (who has an excellent range of Westminster contacts), he was inclined to characterise Millar's story as "an interesting piece of speculation". He told me however that he could not find any evidence of anything concrete in the way of a likely Tory - Unionist deal.

In the context of Mayhew's approaches to the UUP before the Maastricht vote, it is as well to bear in mind that Mayhew made similar approaches to the SDLP who were, if anything, more vulnerable on the Maastricht issue.

While such speculation is likely to be a recurring theme during the life of this parliament, the fact remains that the unionists are still widely viewed on both side of the house in Westminster as unreliable allies at the best of times. For this reason, they are unlikely to be able to extract a significant price for their parliamentary vote. Having said that however, a Select Committee might not be viewed by many members as constituting a particularly significant price in terms of the survival of the Government at some time in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brendan McMahon', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Brendan McMahon
Press & Information Officer