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AMBASÁID NA hÉIREANN, LONDAIN



IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

17, GROSVENOR PLACE,
SW1X 7HR

Telephone: 071-235 2171

TELEX: 916104

Fax: 071-245 6961

Political Developments file

16 September 1993

Mr Sean O hUiginn
Assistant Secretary
Anglo Irish Division
HQ

The Party Conferences: the Conservatives

Dear Assistant Secretary

I had lunch on 14 September with Jonathan Caine, political adviser to Sir Patrick Mayhew, in order to get some sense of what we might expect on the Northern Ireland front at this years Conservative party conference which as you know takes place in Blackpool from 4 to 8 October.

I have some misgivings about Caine's value as a source of reliable information. It is difficult to situate him within the NIO system but he certainly has no substantive role within the political/civil service team handling the talks process. His principal role is as a link between the Conservative establishment and the Northern Ireland Tories and he also, on a personal level, has good contacts within the OUP. So long as one is aware of his limitations therefore he can on occasion provide an interesting perspective on developments.

Molyneux

Jim Molyneux will attend this years Conference. This is now a matter of public knowledge and Caine told me that the NIO had received several calls from journalists seeking comment on this. Molyneux will address the traditional Friends of the Union meeting and one other fringe organised by a right wing grouping whom no one seems to have previously heard of. Molyneux's last appearance at a Conservative conference was in 1989 when, as Mr Donoghue may recall, he and I met him at that years fringe meeting of the Friends of the Union where he shared the platform with the late Ian Gow.

Molyneux is unlikely to relish the social whirl of a party conference and his appearance at Blackpool can only have one purpose - to underscore the newly discovered ties with the Conservatives. We will of course be closely monitoring his public appearances and will forward as soon as possible a full account of his remarks. It tells us something about the nature of Unionist politics that at the previous weeks Labour gathering in Brighton Chris McGimpsey and Reg Empey are scheduled to appear at a fringe meeting sponsored by the Northern Ireland Workers Party!

According to Caine there will be no conference debate on Northern Ireland. There was one last year and Mayhew feels that this was sufficient and that no useful purpose would be served by encouraging a trend toward annual conference debates on Northern Ireland: In any event the bulk of the motions submitted to Central Office, mainly from the Northern Ireland Tories, are heavily integrationist and if there were to be a Conference debate it would inevitably be coloured by this and dominated by unhelpful contributions from the "Ulster Tories".

The Northern Ireland Conservatives

Speaking of the Northern Ireland Conservatives Caine confirmed that they are in great disarray. Alastair Cooke, one of the senior research officers at Conservative Central office and a long standing Unionist supporter, travelled to Northern Ireland recently to try and rally flagging spirits after the local elections. He told Caine on his return that the Ulster Tories were virtually a lost cause. There had been some hopes that Laurence Kennedy's departure from the local government scene might help matters by making way for a less divisive figure but this had not proved to be the case. Caine took comfort from the debate within the Labour party about the issue of Labour representation predicting that if Labour were to organise in Northern Ireland party headquarters would rue the day that decision were taken.

The "non deal"

Caine spoke about the "non deal". Much of what he had to say was old hat based on news paper comment rather than on any insider knowledge. He nonetheless made one or two interesting points which I set out for what they are worth.

According to Caine the high-point of Molyneux's political career were those years of the Callaghan government, when under the guidance of Enoch Powell, Unionism wrung the maximum concessions from a beleaguered Labour Government. Ever since Molyneux has dreamt of a repeat performance and now in the closing years of his career opportunity knocks for a second time. All his instincts would be to make maximum use of the government's uncertain majority. Given his background it was the obvious way forward and the only opportunity he might have before his departure from political life to leave a worthwhile legacy. He would have had to work hard to persuade some at

least of his colleagues of the value of a deal with the Conservatives. There would have been no shortage of advice reminding him of the traitorous nature of modern Conservatism. This would have been tempered however by the experience in the vote on the pit closures when OUP support had been tangibly rewarded. This, taken together with the various signals over many months, would have made Molyneaux's task easier.

Caine, echoing Frank Millar's thesis, acknowledged the calculated risk taken by Molyneaux. In the absence of any formal agreement he has to depend to an extent on the Government's good will and on other tight votes arising in future sessions to remind the Conservative whips of their obligation to deliver. He has a limited time scale - before the European elections at the latest - within which to show his own people that the risk has in fact paid off.

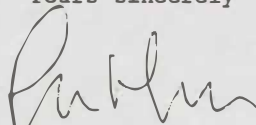
The Select Committee

On this topic Caine spoke with an assurance which suggested to me an insight based on inside information. He was quite certain that a select committee on Northern Ireland would be conceded separately from any other developments and this sooner rather than later. He was of the view that anything less would leave Molyneaux very exposed since the question of a select committee had become loaded with such significance. From the Government's viewpoint it was also the most acceptable and deliverable option. They could always stand apart from it making the case that it was a matter for Parliament. From a Westminster viewpoint there were no sustainable arguments to be made against it and several strong arguments in its favour. He hinted that Mayhew and the NIO were not in favour being more sensitive to the criticism that to grant it would be to endorse the integrationist agenda. On the other hand everyone expected the NIO to oppose it on the grounds that turkeys did not vote for Christmas. He was not certain how the issue might develop but if the OUP kept up the pressure in the next session the Leader of the House, sooner rather than later, was likely to propose the necessary motion.

Michael Ancram

Caine made an observation about Ancram which is worth nothing. He said that he detected among the officials at the NIO an uneasiness with Ancram's handling of the contacts with the parties. He put this down to Ancram's inexperience coupled with an excess of enthusiasm on his part.

Yours sincerely



Joe Hayes
Counsellor