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RS
Mr. F. Murray
ambassador w'ton
Joint Secretary
Counsellor #1

Mr. F. Murray
Mr. O'Sullivan
I have taken a copy
10-3-93

9/3
M. O'Sullivan
12/3/93

CONFIDENTIAL

8 March 1993

Mr Seán Ó hUiginn
Assistant Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin

CONVERSATION WITH SIR ROBIN BUTLER

Dear Assistant Secretary

The Cabinet Secretary, Sir Robin Butler, joined me for lunch today and I am reporting hereunder the main points of interest arising in our conversation.

Major-Clinton Meeting

Butler accompanied the Prime Minister on his recent visit to Washington and generally confirmed what the American Ambassador told me on 1 March about the meeting with President Clinton. He described the President as impressive, intelligent, a very good listener and possessed of a good sense of humour. The Prime Minister and the President got on extremely well together. John Major also has a lively sense of humour and Butler found that the President responded very well to this, picking up every witty nuance in a way that Mitterrand or Kohl, for instance, never could. The closeness of their ages, a common mother tongue and the fact that the President spent some time studying in Britain - all contributed to this very happy relationship, in Butler's view. Although the President had been preoccupied with the economy and the making of appointments to his team since taking up office, he gave the impression to the British side that he would be thoughtful and circumspect in his handling of foreign affairs generally. At the last count the number of Rhodes scholars appointed to various senior positions by the new administration was already 31. Butler and Clinton attended the same college at Oxford and the President quickly realised this from the tie worn by the Cabinet Secretary. In summary, the British side were delighted with the visit and with the personal relationship struck up by the two leaders. Their tete-a-tete (at which Butler was not present) lasted much longer than expected. The media predictions about the meeting and about issues expected to be divisive, such as the peace envoy and Bosnia, had been very wide of the mark.

The Peace Envoy

Butler was of the view that the special Presidential representative envisaged would undertake a once-off, fact-finding mission and report back to the President. This limited definition of the role need not be disclosed in advance. Such a mission would cause no problems or embarrassment to the British and was unlikely to materialise until after the local elections in Northern Ireland in May. Butler thought there was a possibility of a White House announcement on the subject on or even before St Patrick's Day. From what he said, he did not appear to rule out the possibility of Speaker Foley being chosen for the mission. He had been seated beside him at lunch and had been very impressed by his knowledge of the situation in Northern Ireland. Foley had told him he could honestly say he had not been asked by the President to take on the task. Butler went on to say that if the President's choice is Foley, the delay in undertaking the mission could be easily explained by the need for the Speaker to be in Washington during these crucial months, as the President and his new administration seek to formulate and implement their legislative programme. The Cabinet Secretary was very impressed by the President's skill in dealing with questions at the press conference. In reply to an awkward query about human rights in Northern Ireland, the President said that the only way forward was through a political approach and that all human rights aspects would have to be addressed in the process.

Sir Patrick Mayhew

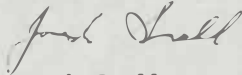
The Cabinet Secretary spoke in very positive terms of Sir Patrick Mayhew's performance as Northern Ireland Secretary. He had brought with him to the difficult post the patience of Peter Brooke and the incisiveness of a lawyer. He was, he said, aware that there had been a strong Unionist reaction to his Coleraine speech, that he had made other speeches since then and that there were more planned over the coming weeks. I used the opportunity to say that Mayhew's speech at Hazelgrove was a rather crude over-correction and that the one delivered a week ago also seemed over-compensatory. In reply to my question as to whether Mayhew was likely to be regarded as a future candidate for the higher office of Home Secretary, Butler answered in the affirmative without hesitation, noting that three of his predecessors in the Northern Ireland job - Whitelaw, Rees and Hurd - were promoted to the Home Office.

Resumed Talks

The Cabinet Secretary was impressed by the Tánaiste's speech on 5 March. He was of the view that the Unionist response, especially that of Paisley, should not be taken too seriously because of the local elections campaign. I drew his attention to the totally unrealistic preconditions now being set by

Unionist spokesmen in relation to Articles 2 & 3. They cannot be serious about new talks if they mean what they say. The situation after the election should be different, Butler said, and, in his view, Paisley could not afford to remain aloof if the tide of public opinion favoured a resumption of talks. I said I assumed that the Secretary of State would be in a position to ensure that the Official Unionists, at least, would be back at the negotiating table.

Yours sincerely



Joseph Small
Ambassador