



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
National Archives

Reference Code: 2021/95/44

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Political Overview

The Prime Minister is likely to travel to Dublin in a particularly buoyant mood. There has been a broadly positive reaction to Tuesday's budget and against the odds, the Government have successfully weathered the potentially damaging storm engendered by the disclosure of its contacts with Sinn Fein and the IRA. Having had an almost constant run of political misfortune since his April 1992 general election victory, there is a growing sense in recent weeks that the tide is now finally beginning to turn in Mr Major's favour. One theme touched on in the initial press coverage of his initiative on Northern Ireland was the suggestion that his record of bad luck would inevitably mean that this, too, might come to grief. In similar vein, in recent weeks, there has been a fear among those close to him that despite Kenneth Clark's known political and communication skills, his first budget could not avoid causing public discontent and inevitable division on the Conservative backbenches.

In the event, the Prime Minister has had an uncharacteristic run of good fortune despite the revelations about contact with Sinn Fein/IRA. For the first time since his accession to office he has successfully identified a major policy issue, made it his own and has been rewarded with a favourable public and media response. Within days of his Guildhall speech, Conservative Central Office knew that public opinion was with him on Northern Ireland. Opinion on the Conservative backbenches caught up, albeit slowly, and with some misgivings. Concern within the parliamentary party had less to do with any worry about the constitutional future of Northern Ireland and more with the danger of alienating the newly acquired allies on the OUP benches. So long as the Prime Minister's statements on Northern Ireland were couched in general terms, and in particular avoided specifics on how far he might be prepared to go in diluting the Union, doubting Tory MPs were prepared to stifle their scepticism. The apparent bottom line, however, which united all wings of the Conservative party, was the insistence that whatever else the Government might do, there could be no question of negotiations or a deal with Sinn Fein. In this context, one of the most memorable phrases of recent weeks was the Prime Minister's assertion on 1 November 1993 that the idea of his sitting down and talking with Gerry Adams and the IRA "would turn my stomach over, as it would most people in this House".

These words have come back to haunt the Prime Minister in recent days. The evidence suggests that until shortly into the debate on Mayhew's statement on 29 November on the contacts between the Government and the IRA, the tide of parliamentary opinion could have gone either way. The Northern Ireland media had given Mayhew a tough time in the immediate aftermath of the week-end disclosures. His press conference in Stormont on Sunday had not gone well at all. On the contrary, it was clear that he was a shaken man. Gone was the confident, over-bearing attitude that characterises his encounters with the media. He appeared to be an extremely worried, chastened man and he returned to London fearing the worst. The reaction of the British media, however, once again demonstrated that media opinion on this side of the water is markedly ahead of political opinion and, on this issue, at least, - is prepared to accept a great deal more than the

Government is prepared to give them credit for. The favourable press reaction in Britain helped greatly to soothe initial anxieties on the Conservative backbenches. It also rapidly persuaded the Opposition that they could not afford to make political capital out of the disclosures, even out of the obvious credibility gap between the Government's public statements and its actions behind the scenes. It quickly became clear that the DUP would be the sole critic of the Government's actions. Paisley's behaviour, culminating in his expulsion from the House in the course of Monday's debate, after he accused Mayhew of telling lies, had the effect of uniting the Conservative backbenchers behind the Government. Leaving aside the very divisive issue of Europe, the Tory party has the capacity to close ranks in very difficult situations and the recent disclosures are proof of this.

With this danger behind him and the Conservative party prepared to accept the seemingly impossible, it is clear that the Prime Minister's hand has been considerably strengthened. The success of this week's Budget is not unrelated, to the extent that it, too, has united the Conservative party and put to one side, for the moment at least, the lingering talk of disenchantment with the Prime Minister's leadership. In relation to the Government's good fortune in overcoming the potential crisis of confidence over its contacts with the IRA, there are those, even on their own benches, who wonder at their ability to come unscathed from the affair. They point to Jim Molyneaux's lack of criticism, a position believed to be at odds with that of many of his party colleagues, and they wonder what further price might have been paid to secure his acquiescence. We, too, must ask this central question, to see to what extent Major has made himself a prisoner of the Unionists.

There are few who believe that the sole price of Molyneaux's continued support is a Northern Ireland Select Committee. This, of course, remains in prospect despite doubts about the delivery date. It was further considered by the Procedure Committee on Wednesday of this week and passed to the Government for decision. It is unlikely, however, that such a concession would be sufficient of itself to sustain Molyneaux's support for the Government in the face of the weekend disclosures. Molyneaux clearly continues to place great store on his personal relationship with the Prime Minister. It is clear that Mr Major, for his part, carefully cultivates Molyneaux and there is a sense at Westminster that he is kept fully briefed by Downing Street and enjoys easy access to the Prime Minister. The conventional wisdom is that every time a sceptical OUP colleague queries Molyneaux on the wisdom of the party's continued support for the Government, he directs them to listen to Kevin McNamara and to reflect on the alternative to the present Government. Despite the gaps in this thinking, it should not be underestimated as an important factor for the OUP. It is not without significance, for example, that Molyneaux's contribution to the debate on Mayhew's statement should focus in a particularly unpleasant way on McNamara, whom he described as acting as a spokesman for Gerry Adams in the Parliament.

In the medium term, uppermost in the Prime Minister's mind is the next big political test for the Conservative party - the local elections of May 1994 and the European elections a month later. His political fortunes are in the ascendant this week but he knows better than most the fickleness of his own backbenchers.

At this year's party conference, the widely held view, even among those close to him, was that he would be fortunate to survive another year at most. The consensus view at Blackpool was that the acid test for him would be the party's performance in the local and European elections. The slogan "Back to Basics", adopted as a definition of John Major's philosophy, has to be construed in that context. We know, for example, that in preparing the legislative programme set out in the Queen's speech, the Government's strategy was to limit it as far as possible to essential items of legislation and, where feasible, to those least likely to cause dissent in order, in the interim, to minimise the risk of political crises. In this context, there was surprise at the Prime Minister's decision to accord priority to Northern Ireland and we have some evidence of scepticism among some Cabinet colleagues at the wisdom of such a politically fraught move at this time. So far, however, the Prime Minister has confounded his critics and shown that Northern Ireland could very well be his personal 'Falklands factor'. He will only succeed, as we know, if he shows sufficient courage and statesmanship - qualities which are not very apparent - and a capacity to free himself from any commitments or understandings the Unionists feel they have extracted from him since last July. He is very lucky that the Opposition parties acted so responsibly in the House on Monday in the wider interest of the search for peace in Northern Ireland. It surely is part of Major's strategy for his meeting with the Taoiseach on Friday next to avoid any real concessions to guard himself against inevitable accusations of weakness and sell-out in Dublin by the Unionists and their Tory right-wing supporters.

To complete the picture, there is one practical consequence of the budget which is worth noting; in the weeks leading up to it, it was apparent that the next test of the OUP's alliance with the Government would be the vote on the Government's proposal to impose VAT on domestic fuel. The budget included a clever compensation package to limit the the effects of this unpopular imposition on pensioners and the low-paid. The result is that there is unlikely to be, in the short term at least, any pressing need for the support of the OUP in ensuring the passage of vital aspects of the Finance Bill.

December 1993