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**Reference Code:** 2021/96/29

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8 February 1994

Mr Seán O hUiginn  
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Dear Assistant Secretary

ADAMS UPSETS ANGLO-AMERICAN "SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP"

As the dust begins to settle after the furore over Gerry Adams' visit to New York, it may be useful to the Department to have an assessment of how things were seen from a London perspective.

There is no doubt that the decision by President Clinton personally to grant a visa to Adams against the strong public opposition of the Government here, was a deeply humiliating experience for the British. Adams is, of course, a hated figure in the eyes of the Government and he is regularly demonised in the pro-Tory media. Having successfully persuaded the Americans over a period of twenty years not to allow Adams into the United States, it came as a bitter blow to the British when the visa was granted. By making such a big, public issue of the visa affair the British unwittingly ensured that the visit acquired a status and publicity value it did not deserve and Adams, of course, exploited the situation to the maximum extent possible. The fact that his words had to be voiced over by an actor for British listeners and viewers added to Britain's discomfiture over the whole episode, not to mention the spectacle of a Congressman introducing Adams to an audience as an Irish statesman.

Clearly the greatest concern both in Downing Street and the Foreign Office was the damage that the affair may have inflicted on the so-called special relationship between Britain and the United States. Throughout the week this was the persistent theme of the Lobby briefings, dutifully reflected with remarkably little critical analysis, in the extensive media comment. The image cultivated in none too subtle terms by the Prime Minister's new and energetic Press Secretary, Christopher Meyer, fresh from his posting as Deputy Head of Mission at their Embassy in Washington, was of a weak, ill-informed President who was all too easily persuaded of Mr Adams' bona fides. According to the Downing Street scenario the President sacrificed long term diplomatic

interests for short term domestic gains in response to pressure from a well organised Irish-American lobby.

This basic script had of course a number of interesting if predictable sub-plots, all of them critical of President Clinton. Much was made, for example, of the involvement of Conservative Central Office in the Bush campaign, and the efforts of the Home Office to research Bill Clinton's period as a Rhodes Scholar in Oxford in the hope that some incident might be uncovered which could be used against him in the Presidential election campaign. In recalling these events, which remain a source of deep embarrassment to senior figures in the Conservative party and which they fervently wish to forget, the Tory tabloids implied that the decision to grant the visa to Adams was motivated by a vindictive urge on the part of the President to hit out at the Prime Minister and the Conservative party.

We have reported in the daily press summaries on the detail of the British media reaction. In terms of editorial response the essence of thinking among an influential segment of Conservative opinion was set out by Charles Moore, the editor of The Sunday Telegraph in the leading article on 6 February. Moore, an ardent Thatcherite, and critic of John Major, is frequently at odds with mainstream Conservative opinion but on occasion he catches its mood with great authority, expressing with clarity and fluency the sense of outrage provoked by the TV images of Gerry Adams' welcome in America. The granting of the visa, according to Moore, was "a momentous event". He went on: "It undid the work of more than 20 years' unusually successful British diplomacy. The American political elites have Nationalist sympathies, but until now, repeated British propaganda campaigns and good personal contacts have kept those sympathies in check. Ronald Reagan, one of only two American Presidents of Southern Irish descent, always accepted Margaret Thatcher's view of the IRA. The State Department has long been persuaded of it, as has Mr Ray Seitz, the most politically adept American Ambassador to London for a generation. Yet Mr Clinton's White House went its own sour way".

Moore's reasoning as to why this was so is worth noting since it presents the type of arguments which will find an easy resonance on the Conservative backbenches. In the first place, according to Moore, the special relationship is no longer special "for the obvious reason that the defensive alliance on which it was built is now, in the absence of an organised communist threat, vestigial". In that sense, Moore concludes that the American decision over the visa, "however distasteful, is a response to the new reality". "By the same token", he continues, "there is no longer a need for Britain to agonise over transatlantic rows. "Britain should follow the example of Israel and recognise that an expression of "outrage at the giving of a visa to our most active and murderous enemy " would not endanger the alliance.

Moore's sharp criticism of the Government for failing to speak its mind with sufficient force is potentially damaging for the Prime Minister at the very time when he is desperately attempting to present a new, robust image such as that exhibited last week when he slapped down his right wing critics within the party. It also undermines John Major's image as a statesman, since his handling of the crisis demonstrated his lack of access to the American President by his apparent unwillingness or inability to simply pick up the telephone and call Mr Clinton. The contrast with

Mrs Thatcher will not be lost on his critics within the party in that connection.

The Sunday Times of 6 February also devoted a prominent editorial to the visa issue "and the sorry consequences it [Clinton's foreign policy] has had for the Anglo-American relationship". Noting that the President had to assuage the Irish-American lobby, the editorial nevertheless roundly attacks him for his "shameful decision". "The fact that it meant slighting America's closest ally and plunging the special relationship into its worst crisis since Suez counted for nought", it opined. Regretting Clinton's preoccupation with the perceived economic opportunities of the Pacific Rim, the editorial states that the President "thinks very little about Europe - and almost not at all about Britain". This is seen as particularly bad news for Britain: "As the European country closest to the United States we have the most to lose from American disengagement". A senior Presidential aide is quoted as telling the Sunday Times that "Bill Clinton does not have a great fondness for John Major" whilst a White House foreign policy adviser is supposed to have put it more bluntly: "Clinton hates Major". Comparing the situation with the Thatcher years when "she was consulted on almost everything" by Washington, the editorial claims that Clinton does not really care what Major thinks and never thinks of asking him. "Major had to struggle to get a 10-minute bilateral meeting with the President at the NATO Summit", it said. Philip Stephens, writing in the Financial Times of 4 February, stated that France and Germany were the focus of US attention at the NATO Summit. While noting that the State Department and the Foreign Office continue to enjoy the sort of easy relationship that comes with the habit of agreeing, he nevertheless proffers the interesting view that: "The weight Washington attaches to British views is in direct proportion to the role London plays in the European Union. That link between influence in Brussels and in Washington is likely to strengthen rather than weaken as the US reduces its commitments in Europe". Overall, Stephens concluded that the Adams visa affair was remarkable, not so much in terms of any new damage inflicted on UK/US relations as in what it revealed about the state that relationship had already reached. "It is not an encouraging picture", he wrote.

Reporting from Washington for The Independent on 4 February, Rupert Cornwell also dwelt on the so-called special relationship in the wake of the Adams visit. He makes the point that although President Clinton went to Oxford, "he has no special leaning towards Britain. Among today's crop of European leaders, Mr Kohl provides the company he likes best. Germany, for both its approach to the domestic issues that fascinate Mr Clinton and because of its geostrategic position, is the European country that counts for him". Cornwell also mentions that, in American eyes, "Bosnia is a greater irritant to relations with Britain than the IRA".

The Prime Minister did take the highly unusual step of calling in the US Ambassador on 1 February. The Department will be aware from earlier reports of the strongly pro-British stance of Ambassador Seitz, a career diplomat who is highly regarded among the Conservative establishment. In the media's account of the internal line-up in the visa debate within the US Administration, Seitz is numbered among the angels to the extent that he is said to have strongly opposed the granting of a visa. Ambassador Kennedy-Smith,



on the other hand, is clearly identified as a strong advocate in favour of granting the visa.

As Mr Wrafter has already reported, he and Joe Hayes attended a meeting of the parliamentary press gallery on 2 February where Seitz was the guest of honour. It was a difficult occasion for him and he disarmingly admitted that he had thought about ducking it. The careful line which he took in assessing the state of the "special relationship" was to recall the many vicissitudes which it had undergone in the past and to situate the furore over Gerry Adams in the context of a close and developing relationship which could surely transcend the occasional set back. This was not his happiest moment as US Ambassador to London but neither did the decision to grant a visa "signal a new departure or a collapse of confidence". He characterised the President's decision to grant the visa as a gamble which might or might not pay off.

The contrast between Seitz's emollient words and the strong terms used by the Prime Minister's press secretary earlier that day in the lobby briefing to convey a sense of Government outrage were not lost on the journalists. Seitz's speech was widely reported but set against a background which suggested that the relationship between the two countries was at its lowest point for many years. Ready comparisons were made with the Suez crisis.

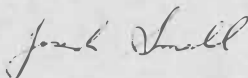
On this last point the Evening Standard of 2 February carried a very prominent article headed "The Worst quarrel we've had since Suez" written by Richard Perle, the former American Assistant Secretary for Defence. He, too, focused on the special relationship, describing the Adams visa affair as the most serious threat to that relationship since Eisenhower's reaction to the Suez crisis nearly 40 years ago. He went on to state that: "Indeed, in some respects the ease with which the White House shrugged off British objections and invited Adams in is a more troubling sign than Suez that the "special relationship" is in trouble. This is because there was no compelling reason for the US to break ranks with its closest ally over a 48-hour visa for an Irish politician whose party can't get elected dog-catcher" Perle proceeded to analyse the "special relationship". What made it "special, even unique, has been the effort each of us has made to support the other whenever possible, differing only - and reluctantly - when all efforts to agree proved unavailing. The 'special relationship' has entailed a strong presumption, not a guarantee, of agreement between us". Developing this point, Perle claims that over the past 40 years there have been three occasions when the two Governments found it impossible to agree: the Suez crisis; the despatch of American troops to Grenada and the Adams visa affair. He concluded that granting the visa was a mistake and that there was work to be done in putting the "special relationship" back in place "where it belongs".

The Adams story has now faded from the front pages, replaced by the shelling of Sarejevo and the particular demands which this puts on the NATO allies. Both sides have set out to mend fences but the lessons have not been lost, especially on the British. Within the Foreign Office the image of the much respected Foreign Secretary playing second fiddle to Gerry Adams on American TV brought home in a very direct way the humiliating setback which had been suffered. If nothing else it may reinforce the need for the Foreign Office to play a more direct role in the management of Northern Ireland policy.

There are also lessons for the Government nearer to home. Again these are touched on in the Sunday Telegraph editorial which points the finger at "debased television, limp diplomacy and politicians who actually congratulate themselves on having no interest in the union of the country they govern". The Americans, Moore writes, are justifiably puzzled by British anger since it appears at odds with the Government's recent conduct. "Mr Clinton's defenders have a case when they say they cannot see why a man with whom the British Government has had secret communications for years, and to whom it has extended an invitation to sit down and talk, should not be allowed to come and tell America what he thinks. They may even believe that by allowing him to do so they are helping the cause of peace in Northern Ireland."

These sentiments, too, will be picked up on the Tory backbenches, especially among those who remain suspicious of where the Prime Minister's Northern Ireland policy may eventually be leading. The fall out from Gerry Adams' New York visit will have done a great deal to reinforce their sense of unease. The controversy over Gerry Adams' visa and the damage caused to the so-called special relationship will inevitably resurface again in the media when John Major visits Washington at the end of this month, unless, of course, Gerry Adams takes everyone here by surprise in the meanwhile by announcing acceptance of the Joint Declaration.

Yours sincerely



Joseph Small  
Ambassador