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Mr Seán Ó'hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin 2

Dear Secretary,

MEETING WITH RICHARD SPRING MP, PPS TO SIR PATRICK MAYHEW

I had lunch yesterday with Richard Spring, the South African born Conservative MP who was promoted in the autumn to be PPS to Sir Patrick Mayhew. The following are the main points of our discussion.

Unionist Reaction to the Framework Document

Spring described with a mixture of humour and dismay the reaction of the UUP MPs to the Framework Document. He said that if we have been struck by their public reaction, we could take it that their private reaction is "double" what they have said in public. Whereas normally the Unionists sit together in the corner of the tea room in the House of Commons, near the Conservative half of the room, now they are fanning out to complain fiercely to anyone who will listen. "Seeing David Trimble, one fears he will have a heart attack".

A main theme of the Unionists is that they have been "betrayed" by the Government. This puts the Prime Minister and Sir Patrick Mayhew in a difficult position. Molyneaux, although he never saw the draft document itself, was fully briefed on a Privy Council basis. But to expose this now would undermine his position in the UUP. Nor does the British Government want to enter into public debate about what Michael Ancram said to a group of three UUPs at a series of briefings.

To illustrate the mood in the Commons, Spring described to me a vigorous debate over the details of the Framework Document between the Conservative MP Angela Knight and Willie Ross. Knight, amazed at Ross's intensity, went away to read the document. She then returned to the fray to say that she cannot see in the text the things Ross sees.

Spring said that insofar as the Unionists are talking substance, their main concerns are:-

- the requirement of a 75% majority for some votes in a new Assembly and
- the fact that the proposed North/South body is not to be created by the Assembly.

Spring said bluntly that the 75% figure is a necessary safeguard against a return under any circumstances to the practices of the old Stormont and that the Irish Government could not be expected to leave the creation of a North/South body to the discretion of Assembly.

He emphasised that part of the problem for the British Government in dealing with the UUP is that five of the nine MPs want to succeed Molyneaux as leader. He confirmed that the five contenders are Ross (Molyneaux's own choice), Taylor, Trimble, Maginnis and Smyth.

In Spring's view, the Unionists of all hues are demonstrating "anti-British" feelings at this time. Trimble in particular is an example of this. Spring also mentioned that Paisley refuses to shake hands with Michael Ancram because he sees him "as part of an international Popish conspiracy" and that some of the Unionists are holding Mayhew's ascendancy background against him and are even saying "never trust a Corkman".

Under all these circumstances, the British Government regards the preservation in office of Jim Molyneaux as an important objective. Spring described Molyneaux with some sympathy: although "capable of being Machiavellian", Molyneaux is badly shaken by current events, to the degree that one might fear for his health. In conversation he can seem absent or distraught. Spring feels nevertheless that the likelihood is that he can survive in office and in so doing play a very useful part.

Possible Future Developments

In the vote on Labour's motion on European Policy tomorrow evening 1st March, Spring fears that the UUP may vote against the Government. Molyneaux's instinct would be to abstain, but as Trimble and Taylor will want to vote against, the Party as a whole may follow them to preserve its unity.

Spring feels that this could be "cathartic" for the Unionists and could make it easier for them to come round to entering into talks. Molyneaux believes in talks. Others, like Taylor, will be intelligent enough to recognise this as the only real option.

It is rumoured at Westminster that Paisley, Hume and Molyneaux are to meet again this week, which is a further ground for optimism.

For the UUP, it is important in Spring's view that "the fear of Paisley" should die away. There are signs that Unionist public opinion is becoming more moderate, under the influence for example of Archbishop Eames, whom Spring warmly praised. Moreover Paisley's strength is in Spring's view failing: it was noticeable that he had to rely on notes during his recent meeting with the Prime Minister, and he also uses notes for his media appearances, which was not the case in the past.

Spring said that to encourage movement in Unionist public opinion it is important that there should be no ambiguity about the Irish Government's readiness to carry out its commitments on the Constitutional issue. I was able to reassure him on this point, and also on the general state of public opinion in the South.

The most helpful thing of all, regarding Unionist opinion, would in Spring's view be some movement by the IRA on weapons. Spring stressed [comment: and this has been borne out by events subsequently] that Sir Patrick Mayhew did not intend at the weekend to harden the British position. What is being sought is "progress on the issue of decommissioning", which could mean different things.

In the longer term, Spring feels that it will be important for Unionists to be persuaded that there is no plan to subject them to a Catholic ethos; and also that their stereotype of Catholicism, which is mixed up with images from Italy and Spain, is out of keeping with modern realities in Ireland.

Spring remarked that the nine UUP MPs see themselves as simple and straightforward men and juxtapose this image against what they see as the subtlety and untrustworthiness of Catholics. Spring made this comment apologetically, adding that Trimble and Taylor are exceptions to the standard type of Unionist MP - Trimble because of his legal training and university background, and Taylor because of his money-making activities.

If things go well, and Unionist public opinion makes itself felt in the hoped-for way, Spring feels that it will be possible to achieve a formal agreement along the general lines of the Framework Document under the present Conservative Government. As a further reason for relative optimism, he cited the interest of Unionist politicians in a new Assembly.

Spring believes that round-table talks may eventually be based on an agenda stated in general terms but covering the themes of the Framework Document. The tabling of papers by the UUP and DUP can be seen as a stepping-stone to this type of solution. [Comment: The suggestion that future negotiations could be based on topics, rather than the Framework Document as such, was also in the mind of the Home Secretary when I had the opportunity to speak with him on 18th February - my report on that meeting refers.]

A less favourable scenario, mentioned by Spring only to dismiss it, is that once the ceasefires seems fully secure the Unionists will argue that no further political discussion is necessary.

The State of the Conservative Party

Spring said that although one or two of the Eurosceptics are "as high as kites" on their own ideas some of them will vote with the Government tomorrow evening and will have the whip restored. Spring feels that the Government will very likely win the Europe vote by a narrow margin and will in any case win any confidence vote arising out of a defeat. [Comment: There are reports, also picked up in his contacts by Mr Wrafter, that not all Lib Dem and Labour MPs will be present for the vote tomorrow evening. On the assumption that the Conservatives will survive the vote, the real issue is what hostages to fortune the Prime Minister may give in order to reassure the Eurosceptics. We understand in this connection that Douglas Hurd intends to speak on Europe tonight, Tuesday, in an effort to shape Conservative opinion. The pro Europeans in the Cabinet - and probably Major himself - will want to avoid a commitment to a referendum after the next IGC largely on the grounds that such a referendum would be difficult for the British Government to win].

Spring said that the Parliamentary situation will worsen as the year progresses. Following the death a little over a week ago of Nicholas Fairbairn MP, the Conservatives are due to lose a by-election at some point in the coming months, and perhaps and three further by-elections could be caused this year because of the ill health of Conservative MPs. It is also certain that the Conservatives will do very badly in the local elections in May and that this will lead to criticism of the Prime Minister.

This means that the role of the group of UUP MPs will come strongly into focus again in the second half of this year. Spring believes that the Unionists will refrain from trying to bring down the Government because a) a Labour Government would be less sympathetic to Unionism and b) "the Conservative Party would never forgive them". Spring nevertheless advised that the impact of the May local elections on the fortunes of the Conservative Party is something that we should factor into our thinking.

On Conservative attitudes to Northern Ireland as such, Spring mentioned the Prime Minister's immense personal commitment to finding a solution. He conveyed the impression that the Cabinet on Tuesday last gave a smooth passage to the Framework Document: John Gummer told him afterwards that "no one could have done better than Paddy" - meaning Sir Patrick Mayhew.

As regards the rank and file of MPs, "opinion-formers such as Andrew Hunter and James Cran" have played a major part in steadying opinion. Spring implied that there may have been some difficult discussions but that the Parliamentary Party has responded well and is behind the Framework Document.

Conclusion

I conclude from the tenor of Spring's conversation that there has been something of a shift in relations between the Conservatives

and the UUP: there is now more "daylight" between them than ever before. This state of affairs rests, of course, on the premise that the approach in the Framework Document enables Unionists to maintain the Union under the stated conditions and that there is something irrational and emotional about their conduct over the past week.

The key assumption that follows from this analysis of Unionist reactions is that Unionist public opinion can be reconciled in the relatively near term to round-table talks against the background of the Framework Document and that a formal agreement, marking a new beginning for Northern Ireland, can be achieved under the present Conservative Government.

As compared to only a few months ago, I noticed a strong and growing conviction that the Irish Government is the natural ally of Westminster in this process. Since my last meeting with him in November, on which I reported at the time, Spring has become more familiar with his brief but also, I feel, more confident about dealing with ourselves.

Yours sincerely

Philip McDonagh

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Counsellor