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Reference Code: 2021/50/260

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AMBASAID NA HEIREANN, LONDAIN



IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

17, GROSVENOR PLACE,
SW1X 7HR

Telephone: 0171-235 2171

Direct Line: 0171-201 2

Fax: 0171-245 6961

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24 May, 1996.

Mr. Seán O hUiginn,
Second Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs,
St. Stephen's Green,
DUBLIN 2.

Dear Secretary,

I attach a note on current British politics which I have prepared for the President's brief for her official visit to Britain. The note deals with aspects of Anglo-Irish relations and you may wish to give it a wider circulation.

Yours sincerely,

Ted Barrington
Ambassador

cc PST
PSS
A/Sec Fahey

Current British Politics

The President's visit to Britain takes place at a time of some considerable turmoil in internal British politics, of strain in Britain's relations with Europe, and of uncertainty in Anglo-Irish relations. Ireland's interests are bound up with, and affected by, developments in all three areas.

Internally the political parties are gearing up for a general election which must be held before the middle of May next year. A precise date is impossible to forecast and senior politicians and commentators can advance equally plausible arguments for an October 96 or May 97 date. Most agree however that, at least up to this week, the Prime Minister intended to soldier on to next Spring in the hope that his and the Conservative Party's fortunes might improve. The theory was that an improving economy would bring about the famous feel-good factor and that tax cuts in the Autumn Budget would be filtering through to people's pockets by the Spring. This rather optimistic scenario has been thrown into question by a series of ominous developments for the Government. Mistakes in spending forecasts, less buoyant than expected tax revenues and the Exchequer implications of the BSE crisis have combined to constrain the Government's freedom of manoeuvre on the crucial tax front and make a giveaway Budget less likely. In these circumstances the Prime Minister may be tempted to go for an earlier rather than a later election.

Of the many woes that have befallen this Government in its final days it is difficult to find a graver issue than the BSE crisis. Since the announcement in late March of a possible link between BSE in cattle and the JCD disease in humans the Government have been on the defensive. All Ministers and senior officials that I speak to confirm that the issue has consumed the time and energies of the Government to the exclusion of almost everything else. The handling of the issue has been hamfisted in the extreme on almost all fronts. Uncertainty over the scientific evidence, an unclear health policy, administrative confusion over the slaughter arrangements, and an inept and vacillating handling of the European dimension have given the impression of an inadequate and directionless administration caught in a crisis which it cannot fully understand or control. It is tempting to see the Prime Minister's announcement this week of non-cooperation with Europe as an effort to transcend these difficulties with the smack of firm Government. And what better target than the organisation and issue that has divided British opinion more than any other for a quarter of a century - the European Union?

Given the structure of the British economy, the nature of Britain's international interests, and the country's history it was always likely that British membership of the European Community would prove difficult. Britain did not fit easily into the political and economic equations that underlay the European project and that were geared more towards continental concerns and in particular the complexities of the Franco-German relationship. What is surprising nonetheless is that after more than 20 years of membership the country has failed to work out a stable relationship with the European Union or to develop any real sense of comfort or ease in working with its European partners. The early days of Major's administration held out some hope that the acrimony and conflict that characterised the Thatcher era could be left behind, and I have no doubt that Major meant it when he said that Britain wanted to be at the heart of Europe. His efforts to build coalitions of interest with European partners brought some success at Maastricht when France and Germany in particular were prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt and to construct compromises on monetary and social policy. Major could with some justification claim "game, set and match" to Britain. For the compromises agreed at Maastricht not only enabled Britain to opt out of certain policies but also fundamentally altered the approach to European construction.

But the hope of that early period has diminished in line with the reduction in Major's Commons majority and the Prime Minister has become increasingly a prisoner of his party's right wing. Major's European policy is now hostage to a small but fanatical wing of his party and increasingly also to the ambitions of his rivals for the Party leadership. Sensing that their leader's days are numbered these rivals - Portillo, Howard and Redwood - are using Europe to undermine the Prime Minister's position and to curry favour with the backbenches and with a press that is almost universally anti-European. What is depressing is that there is no sense of a real debate about the advantages or disadvantages of the European Union or of individual policies but rather an atavistic and irrational reaction to anything coming from Brussels. The decision not to cooperate with European partners catches this mood perfectly and has gone down well with most of the media. Even those like Kenneth Clark, who see no future for Britain outside the European Union, are forced to keep their heads down.

Major is a superb political tactician, and the decision is perhaps good domestic politics. I have heard him admit in private that he is a gambler, and the question that must arise, if he is gambling on Europe, is - where it will it lead? Some of my European colleagues are now evincing real worries about Britain's

longer term future in the European Union. And one does have a sense of forces in operation that may move out of control. For Ireland the signs are disturbing - in the short term in the context of our Presidency and more fundamentally in the longer term if real questions arise about Britain's membership. But we should bear in mind that Britain is in "election mode" and that things may look different after the election when the dust settles.

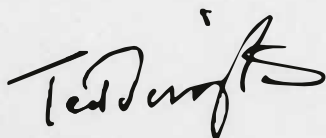
The pressures on Major are also affecting his policy on Northern Ireland and here too his room for manoeuvre is reduced. He is under pressure not just from Unionists but from elements in his own party (Cranborne, Howard and much the same group of backbenchers that take a hostile line on Europe) who feel that his policy has conceded too much to Sinn Fein and are urging a tougher negotiating position on the decommissioning question. Mayhew's tough stance at this week's IGC, of which indeed we had ample warning, and his repeated view that there is no easy drafting compromise, reflect, I believe the parliamentary and political constraints on the Prime Minister. Major himself may want to find a way through, and he has shown remarkable tactical agility in the past, but this was against a background where his Ministerial colleagues and the vast majority of his party were prepared to accept his judgment and to keep any reservations they had to themselves. There are disquieting signs that this is no longer the case (Hunter's warning letter to the PM, public speculation about Cranborne's doubts) and that Major faces a more sceptical and less quiescent party on his Northern Ireland policy than at any time in the recent past. Thatcher faced similar difficulties over the Anglo-Irish Agreement but she had a comfortable majority and a secure position as leader. Major has neither. Faced with this there must be some doubt about his capacity to make the compromises necessary to help deliver inclusive all-party talks or to conduct meaningful negotiations as the general election nears. His attitude and approach in the next week or two will be crucial.

If the election took place today it is likely that Labour's clear and commanding lead in the opinion polls would translate into a decisive victory for Labour and a clear majority in the House of Commons. Labour have had their own difficulties in recent weeks and the Party is not looking quite as surefooted as it was. But most commentators and politicians, even in the Conservative Party, believe that Tony Blair will be Prime Minister this time next year.

A Government with a secure majority in the House of Commons and the authority and will to lead would undoubtedly be good for Britain. Would it be good for Ireland? Probably. But we should not be too sanguine about a Labour victory. Divisions within the Labour Party on Europe have been concealed by

the overriding need for harmony in the quest for power. They could yet emerge under the pressures of Government. And although we could expect the Labour approach to be more constructive Britain's fundamental difficulties on such issues as monetary policy, majority voting, and new competences will not easily be resolved. Robin Cook told me the other day that Labour will need some time to work out its detailed position on European issues and that partners in Europe should understand this.

On Northern Ireland we could hope to have the benefit of a team (Mowlam, Worthington etc) which has been doing its homework and with which we have established close relations. And there is in the wider Labour Party an historic sympathy on Irish issues that can be tapped. As against this however we should note that Blair himself has shown little instinctive interest in Ireland and has preferred to cleave to Major's policy than to strike out on his own. Of importance also will be the fact that a new Labour administration so long out of power will be heavily occupied with implementing reforming policies in such areas as health, education, constitutional change, Scottish and Welsh devolution, and Europe. These will place heavy and competing demands on the new Prime Minister in his first year.



Ted Barrington
Ambassador
24 May 1996

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