

An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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Ambasáid na hÉireann
Londain

Embassy of Ireland
London

Mr. Dermot Gallagher
Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
DFA

28 January 2000

Dear Secretary,

Lunch with Jonathan Caine, Conservative Central Office

I had lunch today with Jonathan Caine, the principal researcher on Northern Ireland at Tory Central Office. Caine, a longstanding Embassy contact, served as political adviser to Patrick Mayhew when he was Secretary of State and, after a brief period in the private sector, returned to Central Office in 1998. He currently spends about ninety per cent of his time on Northern Ireland in support of Andrew Mackay MP and other members of the front bench team. In addition he does some work on the broader political front and occasionally writes speeches for William Hague if George Osborne, his principal speech writer and Danny Finkelstein, the head of policy, are overloaded. Caine admits to unionist inclinations but is well-disposed to Ireland and dialogue with us. He indicated privately that, if a suitable opportunity arose, he would be interested in standing for parliament. He was slightly delayed for our lunch because of renewed rumours about the Queen Mother's health. Having written an obituary on a previous occasion of concern, he had been asked to draft appropriate comments this morning. He remarked lightly that the Tories are determined that Blair will not have the unchallenged opportunity he had to reflect the popular mood at the time of Princess Diana's death should a similar situation arise in the future.

The Current Situation

Caine was in Belfast and Derry last week with Andrew Mackay. They stayed with Lord Glentoran, the Conservative spokesman on the North in the House of Lords. In passing, he repeated Mackay's interest in another visit to Dublin in the months ahead and we agreed to keep in touch on this.

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Caine speculated that, in view of the indications that a decommissioning act is not imminent, General De Chastelain is likely to concentrate on an optimistic forecast of the prospects for actual decommissioning between now and May in his report due on Monday. He thought that this could well have been just enough for Trimble to carry on, and succeed at the Ulster Unionist Council meeting on 12 February, if the Secretary of State had not gone ahead with his statement on implementation of Patten. Caine was critical of the timing of this statement, while acknowledging that a clear signal on implementation was seen by many as important precisely to encourage progress on the decommissioning issue. He is convinced that the timing of Mandelson's action on Patten has added enormously to Trimble's problems and referred to the concern of middle-of-the-road unionist business friends of his on the treatment of the RUC when he met them in Belfast last week. He added that his understanding is that Trimble has made clear to the Taoiseach that he cannot carry on without some actual decommissioning by the end of this month.

Despite this, Caine was not entirely ruling out the possibility of finding a way forward in the days ahead, even without an act of decommissioning. He added that, in any case, his unionist contacts are telling him that the Ulster Unionist Council meeting on 12 February is not likely to be particularly difficult because the situation will be clear well before it starts. Neither did Caine entirely dismiss the very remote possibility that the Republican Movement would "surprise" everyone by some act of decommissioning "at the wire".

When I suggested the need for a calm and steady approach in the immediate future and gently probed issues surrounding Mackay's comment to me last month (report of 1 December 1999 refers) that he would "have to go public" if no decommissioning had occurred by the end of this month, Caine was at some pains to emphasise that his advice, and he was pretty certain Mackay's inclination also, would be to support David Trimble rather than seek to go ahead of him. He added that the Tory team would continue also to rely on guidance from Ken Maginnis who they see as solid and reliable, despite occasional flare-ups, including clashes with the Secretary of State (the most recent example here in London was during the questions after the Commons statement on Patten). With added emphasis he spoke of how Mackay and his colleagues had resisted the sustained pressure from the Daily Telegraph editor, Charles Moore, and other writers on that paper to "out Trimble Trimble". They would continue to do so.

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The Debate on the Disqualification Bill

Caine gave some interesting background on how the Tory approach to the Disqualification Bill had developed. He said that when it was first published last month his advice to the frontbench team had been that they could live with it, while continuing to express concerns about the Government's intention to give office facilities and allowances to the Sinn Féin MP s. However, subsequently backbenchers such as Michael Howard and Eric Forth put pressure on the leadership. Caine added that "even John Major" had expressed some concern and the chief whip had to reassure him.

The upshot was that at a frontbench meeting earlier this month it had been decided to deal with this backbench pressure by tabling the Mackay amendment linking the Disqualification Bill to the commencement of decommissioning (of course, none of the amendments tabled were in the event successful). However, the leadership's continued willingness to accept the Bill's provisions was made clear by Ann Widdicombe in her statement on second reading last Monday.

Caine admitted somewhat ruefully that what had happened thereafter was that the activities of a small group of Tory backbenchers had got "out of hand". The result was that Mackay found himself having to "catch up" and amplify his criticism of the Government's approach, particularly on the theme of Labour arrogance towards the procedures of the House of Commons in its determination to force through all stages of the Bill in two days (normally there would be at least a week allowed between second reading and committee stage).

Caine, not surprisingly, was inclined to emphasise that the Government could have cut short the 26 hour marathon session which ensued by closure motions. However, he also accepted that the Tories involved had, to some extent, scored an own goal by causing the cancellation of Prime Minister's question time on Labour's 1,000th day in office. He added that he presumed that the pressure to get the Disqualification Bill through arose from Sinn Féin concerns (he mentioned Pat Doherty and the Donegal/West Tyrone constituencies) but expressed some mild puzzlement on this score. (I avoided a direct response.)

Before we parted, Caine confirmed another recent change in the Conservative lineup on Northern Ireland. John (Mark) Taylor, MP for Solihull, has replaced Malcolm Moss MP as deputy to Mackay. (We had noticed Taylor sitting beside Mackay on recent occasions, including on the Devolution Order and Patten Statement).

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He also emphasised again that their approach in the days ahead would be to avoid adding to the pressure on Trimble. We agreed to keep in touch.

Yours sincerely,

Colm Ó Floinn
Counsellor

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