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Reference Code:	2022/47/404
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Ambasáid na hÉireann
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Embassy of Ireland
London

Mr. Dáithí O'Ceallaigh
Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
DFA

20 June 2000

Dear Secretary,

Meeting with Andrew Mackay MP, Conservative Spokesman on Northern Ireland, 20 June 2000

I met Andrew Mackay MP, the principal Conservative Spokesman on Northern Ireland, again over lunch today. Mackay, as always, was friendly and thanked me for the concern I expressed regarding the recent incident involving his wife, Julie Kirkbride MP, when she was confronted by an intruder in her bedroom (it was front page news here). Mackay had been away himself on party business in Scotland at the time but said that his wife would recognise the individual involved as she had noticed him loitering around their house two days before. On a lighter note, he added that Ms. Kirkbride had told him about the baby they are expecting next October during their visit to Dublin in early March. I offered to forward a list of Irish names if required for consideration!

Police Bill

Mackay said that the current proceedings in the Committee on the Police Bill was like "watching paint dry on a wall". He anticipates a Government move to guillotine the debate. He is not a member of the Committee and is clearly perfectly happy to leave it to his deputy John (Mark) Taylor MP and the second Tory member, Dominic Grieve MP, a barrister whose forensic skills and style he feels suited to the kind of work involved. Mackay evidently sees the third Tory member, Andrew Hunter MP, as belonging to the small extreme anti-Good Friday Agreement group behind him on the Tory benches who make life difficult from time to time.

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Mackay made clear that the Tories will oppose the Government on the Bill on three main issues which are already covered in the amendments they have tabled to date, and on which we have reported. These are the title, the disqualification issue and a linkage with the start to decommissioning. He added that they do not intend to open a much broader front of opposition to the Bill, but will vigorously reintroduce amendments defeated in the House of Commons when the debate moves to the House of Lords later in July. He expressed himself as reasonably confident of scoring some hits on the Government in the Lords with the support of cross-benchers. He mentioned, as others have done here, that Gerry Fitt's attitude will be an asset in pressing Tory amendments in the House of Lords.

On the title, Mackay was inclined to resist the notion that the Tory amendment tabled to Clause 2 is even stronger than the new clause proposed by Ken Maginnis. In any case, he made no bones about the close co-operation between the Tory members and Maginnis in the Committee.

On the disqualification issue, he repeated a point he has made on the floor of the House previously, to the effect that there is a difference between responsibility for policing issues and other areas of Government, such as e.g. the Department of Education, and that those convicted of scheduled or other offences should not be permitted to serve at all on the Policing Board or the District Policing Partnerships. He was not inclined to accept that the eventual devolution of responsibility for policing, as supported by many unionists, would affect the matter either.

Mackay said that in regard to the third area of their attack on the Government, the Tories would be pressing the case that members of a political party linked to a paramilitary organisation which has not begun actual decommissioning should not be allowed to participate on the Board or a DPP, even if they had never been convicted of an offence. Those appointed from such parties would be allowed to participate only after the commencement of decommissioning. When I probed this a little, he made clear that the Tories would rely on the Prime Minister's recent assurance to Trimble in the House of Commons to the effect that the IRA Confidence Building Measure was only a start and that actual decommissioning would have to follow i.e. in the Tory view the CBM by itself would not permit Sinn Féin members to participate in the Board or the DPPs. At the same time he expressed concern that the CBM had not yet been forthcoming and, in particular, regarding the pressures which were building in

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his view on David Trimble's position (see also below re David Burnside).

Mackay told me that he had met with both Alex Attwood of the SDLP and Mitchell McLaughlin of Sinn Féin on the Police Bill recently. He had found Attwood even "more extreme" on the issue than McLaughlin. Mackay felt that this might be to do with competition between their respective parties but he found it difficult to understand given that "polls showed" that nationalists were not that concerned about the policing issue (he had made the same allegation in his second reading speech on the Police Bill). In a typically provocative remark he then added that, in fact, the SDLP and the Irish Government were now taking a stronger stand on the Police Bill than Sinn Féin and that it was surprising to him to find that "Mitchell McLaughlin was more moderate than Brian Cowen". Staying in the same mode he went on to say that he was aware from "a number of different sources" of resentment in the British system at the critical approach of the Irish Government in recent weeks to the provisions of the Police Bill.

I responded appropriately, including by emphasising the core importance of the policing issue to the nationalist community as a whole (I had earlier suggested that Gerry Fitt's credibility with that community was not high) and the position of the Government that the Patten Report should be implemented in full. I recalled that Minister Cowen had stated on the publication of the Police Bill that it represents another step on the road to this implementation, but that he had made clear also that the Government would remain in close contact with the British Government on certain aspects which were a cause of concern. Both he and the Taoiseach were, of course, pursuing these concerns in the normal channels but it would be unreasonable to suggest that this represented in any way an extreme position. I also suggested in appropriate terms that the common interest of the two Governments in implementation of Patten might not be accepted fully by some of the "different sources" in the British system to which he had referred. I further took the opportunity to draw Mackay's attention to the Minister's recent address to the seminar on the Act of Union and he expressed interest in seeing a copy (I am forwarding it to him).

Selection of David Burnside as UUP candidate in South Antrim

Mackay described Burnside as "a dangerous man" and expressed strong surprise that Jeffrey Donaldson had apparently backed him. In his view Burnside will "devour" Donaldson and end the latter's leadership ambitions. He agreed that Burnside had taken care to avoid being painted into an outright anti-Good Friday Agreement position, despite his tabling of the motion on retaining the

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RUC name in the UUC, and that he would probably maintain a flexible position in the period ahead. However, Mackay repeated with some emphasis that this made him all the more dangerous. He added that the threat to Trimble would be even greater if the CBM did not materialise. In such circumstances he could see another challenge for the leadership with Trimble being defeated this time and "leaving for America".

British Political Situation

Mackay, who is a Hague loyalist, was buoyed by the recent poll showing the narrowest gap between the two principal parties since Labour took power. While cautiously remarking that one poll did not confirm a trend, he feels that Hague is now managing to set the political agenda and the next election is now definitely a "two horse race". The Tories are, in his view, succeeding in rattling the Government on issues ranging from the NHS, to asylum to so-called stealth taxes. His colleague Ann Widdecombe, the shadow Home Secretary, had performed well against Jack Straw yesterday on the football hooligan issue. In Mackay's view, Straw had made the mistake of leaving responsibility for this up to now with a junior Minister in the House of Lords, Lord Bassam of Brighton. The Conservatives would seek to capitalise on their advantage by switching the topic for the so-called "Opposition Day" debate, scheduled for later today, to football hooliganism.

Mackay said that the Conservative's own polling shows overwhelming opposition to dropping the Pound and he cheerfully admitted that they are doing everything they possibly can to make the Euro a central election issue. He believes that Blair would be unwise to wait beyond May next year to call the election. At this stage, he does not expect Northern Ireland to be an issue in that election. He added that there are no plans at present to hold a debate on Northern Ireland at the Conservative Party Conference in early October this year. The Conference will be entirely focussed on the next election and he implied that what would be seen as peripheral issues in that context will be downplayed, in a general tightening up of the policy debates and platform presentation. However, should the need arise there is provision in the timetable for a late debate on any topical issue.

Mackay added that they would be trying to avoid "diversions" such as the Thatcher fringe rally in support of General Pinochet at last year's Conference. They also planned to severely restrict fringe meetings generally in order to keep the focus on the main theme of the Conference. When I recalled the tentative

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efforts last year to hold a *Friends of the Good Friday Agreement* fringe meeting at the Tory Conference (Michael Mates MP was involved), I got the strong impression that the initial view, at least, of Mackay and the Tory leadership will be to resist any such meeting. Mackay said that he did not now have a difficulty meeting with Mitchell McLaughlin etc. "in private" but sharing a platform at the Conservative Conference with him or e.g. David Ervine was a different matter. I again responded appropriately, including by emphasising the importance of cross-party support for the Good Friday Agreement.

Finally, I recalled the lunch hosted by Ambassador Barrington at last year's Conference for the Tory Northern Ireland frontbench team and Mackay said that he would very much welcome such an event at this year's Conference. He will suggest a date when the Conference timetable is clearer.

Yours sincerely,

Colm Ó Floinn
Counsellor

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