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BRITISH EMBASSY, *Man*

DUBLIN. *pc 3/VI*

29 May, 1969.

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S U M M A R Y

FORTHCOMING ELECTION IN THE IRISH REPUBLIC

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2. Statistics and procedure. (Paragraphs 3-4)
3. Comparison between Fianna Fail and Fine Gael in respect of their domestic and foreign policies. (Paragraphs 5-6).
4. Labour: its policies and outlook. (Paragraph 7).
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6. What happens if no single party has a clear majority? (Paragraph 12).
7. Quiescence of Sinn Fein. (Paragraph 13).

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Sir,

FORTHCOMING ELECTION IN THE IRISH REPUBLIC

A general election is to take place in the Republic of Ireland on 18 June and I have the honour to submit the following notes on the political background and the possible outcome.

2. The decision to hold the election at this time was taken by the Taoiseach, Mr. Lynch, after much anxious thought. At the time of the most recent troubles in Northern Ireland, about the end of April, the risks involved in holding elections in the South while serious political disorders were prevalent in the North made it seem certain that the election would not be called before October; but the present unexpectedly orderly condition of Ulster has led Mr. Lynch to go ahead forthwith.

3. The present Government is composed of members of the Fianna Fail Party, which had 74 seats in the Dail. The Chief Opposition party, Fine Gael, had 46 seats, Labour had 18; there were three Independents; and three seats were vacant.

/4. Election

The Rt. Hon. Michael Stewart, M.P.
Secretary of State for Foreign & Commonwealth Affairs,
LONDON S.W.1.

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4. Election is by a system of proportional representation* which Fianna Fail vainly endeavoured to discard last year by means of a Referendum; they failed badly, and this setback has given their opponents hope that the country is really turning away from the historically dominant party.

5. The difference between Fianna Fail and Fine Gael lies almost entirely in the fact that the two parties were the opposing sides in the Irish Civil War of 1922. In terms of ordinary political ideology, there is nothing between them; they are both, by British standards, Conservative in theory, one might fairly say right-wing Conservative. Mr. Lynch has just stated on behalf of his party "We regard the State as being ordained for the individual, not the individual for the State. We believe in the right of private property, in private initiative and private enterprise, supplemented where necessary by the efforts of the State". As for Fine Gael, the election manifesto just issued by Mr. Liam Cosgrave is less easy to quote, but the Irish Times is moved to comment like this: "...A study of the document leaves not an impression of a radical programme but rather the outlook of a profoundly classical conservative policy based on Catholic doctrines as expressed in the phrase, 'acceptance of the subsidiary function of the State', the allegiance to private enterprise, private property and private initiative". Both parties combine this essential

/conservatism

* A very sophisticated system devised for (inflicted upon) Southern Ireland by the Parliament of the United Kingdom in 1920. It was made part of the Irish constitution by Mr. de Valera and Fianna Fail in 1937, thereby ensuring that it could only be changed by means of a referendum.

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conservatism with suitable gestures towards the extension of social welfare; indeed, the Government in its Budget of three weeks ago gave an advance election signal by making substantial increases in various social benefits, though on the average both contributions and benefits are well under half what they are in the United Kingdom.

6. So much for domestic policy. On foreign policy, we may take it that both parties will seek to maintain Catholic Ireland firmly in the anti-Communist camp, to eliminate the frontier with Northern Ireland (provided they can achieve this object without doing anything whatever about it), and to move into the Common Market in parallel with ourselves. The attitude of both parties towards the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Area Agreement is for all practical purposes identical, i.e. they are at heart in favour of it; though whichever is in opposition will look for opportunities to criticise it, often with heat and malice. I may add, in order to keep things in proportion, that a casual glance at the fast-flowing throughput of the first week of full political campaigning does not disclose a single significant reference by Fianna Fail or Fine Gael spokesmen to any of the four subjects mentioned in the preceding two sentences.

7. The Labour Party is rather more lively but also more inchoherent. At first sight there ought to be very large numbers of voters who could be weaned away from the sterile ranks of Fianna Fail and Fine Gael in order to establish a strong party of the left which would push through a programme of social reform, better housing,
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better social service and so on; and indeed there are signs of a movement of political opinion in this direction. But there are serious obstacles in the way. Ireland is still a very Catholic country, and the hierarchy profoundly distrusts programmes of secular social reform, especially when they are put forward by brilliant new recruits to the Labour ranks such as Dr. Conor Cruise O'Brien, a man who is likely to bring little advantage to his party because of his bad relations with the Church, which he has offended both in respect of his private life and by advocating in public the closing of the Irish Embassy in Portugal and the opening of an Embassy in Cuba. (The priests in Ireland may no longer tell their parishoners who to vote for, but they are quite capable of telling them who to vote against). A recent attempt at the Annual Conference to swing Labour to the left appeared to make a great deal of progress, and there was lip service to taking the cause into the streets, with Mr. Gerry Fitt, M.P., showing the way in a violent speech. But the advocacy of deliberate disorder has a very limited appeal in Ireland (though no country has a greater gift for spontaneous disorder); and in the special field of housing, to which Mr. Fitt was mainly referring, the support by the Labour Party of "squatters" has done nothing to advance their popularity with the surprising numbers of Irish workmen and tradesmen who own their own houses or are buying them on mortgage.

8. The chief asset of the Fianna Fail Party in the election is the unassuming but manly and likeable personality of its leader, Mr. Jack Lynch. Some of his principal Ministers are by no means so well liked; some

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are widely held to be arrogant and others are suspected of corruption. Indeed, Mr. Lynch told me a week or two ago that the main personal inducement for him to go for an early election would be that if he came back he would be able to work with a Cabinet of his own choosing, instead of one handed down to him in mid-session by his predecessor. Further weak points in the Fianna Fail position are their recent reverse at the hands of the voters over the constitutional referendum, and the poor relations they have had for years with the farmers. A recent wave of strikes, both in industry and in the field of education, has also helped to irritate public opinion.

9. Fine Gael suffer from a lack of prominent political figures; they have no one to catch the public eye and so are likely to miss some of the advantage which would normally accrue to them as the alternative main party. Still, they present a worthy if plodding image and should gain a few seats here and there.

10. The Labour Party, despite its handicaps and uncertainties, does nevertheless, in comparison with the two other parties, offer something different, and is therefore better fitted than Fine Gael to benefit from the current atmosphere of discontent and boredom with the establishment.

11. Neither opposition party can hope on its own to win more seats than Fianna Fail. The real question is whether the two parties between them can win enough seats to deprive Fianna Fail of its present absolute majority. They stand a very reasonable chance of doing so, and

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indeed the bookmakers' quotations indicate this as the most probable result. For my own part I rather think that a last minute rally to ~~Fiam~~ Fianna Fail may just see that party home by a short head; but it will be a near thing either way.

12. If in fact there should be a result which gives no ~~single~~ party an absolute majority, then the situation is complicated by the reiterated declaration of Mr. Corish on behalf of his party that Labour will never enter into a coalition with Fine Gael. What Mr. Corish wants to see is a coalition between ~~Fianna~~ Fail and Fine Gael, since the consequence would be to produce an authentic and meaningful polarisation of Irish political life and to set an end to the shadow-boxing between two parties whose opposition to each other is set in a mould of bad history; the main beneficiary would be the Labour Party, which would acquire the prestige and prospects of being the titular and effective Opposition. Whether the election will enable this possibility to emerge, and whether if it does Mr. Corish will stand by his words against the temptation of office, are questions which will fall to be considered after 18 June.

13. I had almost overlooked one of the Irish political parties, one which will provide no members at all for the next Dail - Sinn Fein which is the legal mask for the illegal Irish Republican Army or I.R.A., Sinn Fein which is the parent of both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael and now despises both of its offspring. The main point about Sinn Fein at the moment is its apparent quiescence; it has so far found no issue which will secure for it the requisite degree of publicity. Such an issue, an issue

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which if properly exploited might enable it to wield serious influence both direct and indirect on the political life of Ireland, has been maturing in Ulster for the past eight months; but happily for Ireland, for Ireland as a whole, that pot seems to have gone off the boil at a rather fortunate moment. Let us hope it stays that way.

I have the honour to be

With the highest respect,

Sir,

Your Obedient Servant

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'A.G. Gilchrist', written in dark ink.

A.G. GILCHRIST.

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