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Ms Bharucha

TALKS WITH THE IRISH AMBASSADOR: THE IRISH COMMUNITY IN GB; AND TALKS

During a discussion with the Irish Ambassador, Ted Barrington, at the Belgian Embassy earlier today I took the opportunity to ask him whether or not he thought the NIO did enough to keep open lines of contact with the Irish community in London and other parts of Great Britain. I mentioned to him a long held uncertainty of mine as to whether we were better keeping a relatively low profile, as at present, or whether we should start treating the Irish community more systematically as a specific audience to which we should be giving attention. I explained that as far as I was concerned the Irish community had always seemed to be reasonably well integrated into British society and I was anxious that, if we started focusing on them as a group, we might indirectly encourage or emphasise differences or divisions which up till now had not been particularly visible.

2. He understood the dilemma. His clear view was that we should not go out of our way to treat the Irish community as a distinct group. For his own purposes he keeps in close touch with a wide range of people in the Irish community, for example about the talks, but he did not think we needed to do so, nor would it be very easy for us given that they do not really have any over-arching or representative bodies. The closest they come to one is the

Federation of Irish Societies which has, in the past, asked for occasional meetings with Ministers. I believe that they met Mr Murphy recently. But we should leave it at that.

3. The Ambassador might have been spinning me a line, because he would rather that the Irish Government retained principal rights over the Irish community. But I very much doubt it; I think he was just offering sensible advice. Certainly it sounded right to me.

Talks

4. We also had a brief exchange about the talks. Neither of us was in the business of admitting to optimism or pessimism but we both felt that everything was there to be played for. He said that, personally speaking, he was convinced that this new notion of developing the East/West architecture might well be the way to get the Unionists to sign up to Strand Two. He sought reassurance - which I was happy to give - that he was right to argue this with his colleagues in Dublin. I confirmed that to my mind it was the only way yet identified of potentially taking the trick on Strand Two. His argument was that the Unionists needed it in order to show their people that they had transcended frameworks. We both felt that though Trimble's tone often verged on the strident the key thing was that the UUP were actively engaged in the process and seemed serious about trying to press forward.

5. The Ambassador also mentioned that he had greatly enjoyed the Liaison Group meeting last Friday, I imagine because of the positive discussion on Strand Three. We both noted that another meeting was taking place in Dublin as we spoke. I went out of my way to say that Irish officials had produced a "good" first draft of the steering brief for Senator Mitchell, to explain that we had offered some comments on it and that it was no doubt being discussed at today's meeting in Dublin. This provoked a round of mutual back-slapping as we each congratulated the other on the close co-operation that currently exists between the two systems, both at official and Ministerial level. We parted with the Ambassador bemoaning the difficulties of trying to keep up with all the papers

Comment

6. The Ambassador was characteristically helpful and understanding of what we were trying to achieve on Strand Three. I was slightly taken aback when he genuinely seemed to seek independent reassurance that he was right to press Dublin to be open-minded on Strand Three, as part of the solution to Strand Two. This suggests that there are others within the Irish system who are less convinced; we can all guess the likely candidates. There clearly are worries, however, that the two Governments are bending too far to help the Unionists. The Ambassador went out of his way to recite for me the heavy price that Nationalists would have to pay if they were to accept consent (ie partition), a North/South body "with a lot less powers than Nationalists would have hoped", change to the Irish constitution and strong East/West architecture. There is clearly some heart-searching going on in the Irish system.

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