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AMBASSADE D'IRLANDE

17 Grosvenor Place

SW1X 7HR

19 June 1978

Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

Attention Anglo-Irish Section

I wish to report that I had lunch on Friday with John Houston of the Conservative Research Department. The Department will be aware that Houston, who is the editor of the forthcoming autobiography of Brian Faulkner, was previously Northern Ireland Desk Officer at the Research Department but has now taken over the Home Office functions at the same Department. It is understood that he was promoted to this position because of his efficiency as an administrator.

I questioned Houston closely on the meeting between Mr Harry West of the Ulster Unionists and Mrs Thatcher which was held on 12th June. He was not very forthcoming in giving information about this meeting. He said that in contrast to previous meetings with the Conservatives when West tended to be abrasive and aggressive the atmosphere at this meeting was friendly and amicable. The meeting was held in the context of future Conservative policy on Northern Ireland. There had, he thought, been a certain realignment in recent months in the views held by the two parties. The Conservatives are now in favour of a return of local Government powers "on a democratic basis" to Northern Ireland. He said that this did not mean a return to a pre-1968 situation as responsibility for the security forces and housing would not come within the aegis of locally elected bodies.

There are two reasons for the change in Conservative policy towards Northern Ireland according to Houston. Firstly, and he stressed that this is the primary reason, the Conservatives are seeking parliamentary advantage and are trying to reach agreement with the Unionists which would lead to their gaining voting support from the Unionists after the General Election. Secondly, the Conservatives consider that it is necessary "to get things moving again" at a political level in Northern Ireland.

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He said that any agreement in the future between the Conservatives and the Unionists would not be the same as that close alignment which had existed in the past. He thought that the Unionists might support the Conservatives on all major issues but he did not expect them to take the Conservative Whip except on a number of major issues which could be agreed upon beforehand. When I asked Houston if Mrs Thatcher had been closely involved in the decision to follow this new policy line on Northern Ireland he replied that "Neave never takes important decisions without instructions".

I asked Houston had he any indication that the return of local Government powers to Northern Ireland on the lines envisaged by the Conservatives would be any more acceptable to the minority Community in Northern Ireland than previous local Government bodies. He said that the situation is now very different from that which had existed prior to 1968. The security forces including the police are under the control of Westminster rather than Stormont and housing is under the control of an Executive rather than being part of local Government functions. In these circumstances he felt that it might be possible for the minority Community to support local Government structures on the lines proposed by the Conservatives. He admitted that the SDLP would not accept the validity of this argument.

There has been some considerable speculation in Westminster concerning the possible appointment of Airey Neave as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland were the Conservatives to win the next election. The Department will be aware from previous reports that it is thought that while he wishes to be Secretary of State he wants to remain so only for a period of a year. In view of Neave's remarks on a radio interview on BBC Northern Ireland on the 30th May I questioned Houston on the matter. He confirmed that Neave does want to be Secretary of State for Northern Ireland but that he would not wish to retain the position for more than a year. Of course he could not say this in public and hence his remarks to Billy Flackes during the interview in question. Neave is now over 60. He would in Houston's view wish for a peerage and he thought that being Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would perhaps be the best way to achieve this ambition as he could "retire as a Lord" after about a year as Secretary of State.

The Department will also be aware of the leaks which have emanated from the Conservative Party in recent months on issues such as immigration, the most recent of which has been that in the Times of 29 May (copy attached) concerning Christopher Patten, Director of the Conservative Research Department and who is considered to be a supporter of the Heath wing of the Party. The article made public the fact that Patten had lost his job as Minute Secretary to the Shadow Cabinet which is correct. Houston said that the purpose of the leak was to lessen Patten's still considerable influence in the Party. It was he who was responsible for the Conservative policy document, "The Right Approach". He is the prospective Conservative candidate for Bath at the next General Election. This is safe Conservative seat. Houston would not say who had been responsible for the leaks though he said that he strongly suspected that Patrick Cosgrove was involved.

COSGROVE

During the course of the lunch Houston told me that he was travelling to Northern Ireland on Saturday with a group of Conservative Party members. It is now clear, though he did not tell me so, that the group was that led by Mrs Thatcher. He said that the purpose of the visit was that the Conservatives could meet a range of political opinion. Its purpose was not to obtain political insights as the political views of the parties were well known to the Conservatives and indeed those of the Unionist party had been explained to them recently by Harry West. He said that they would host a function jointly with the Ulster Unionist Council and that they expected to meet the SDLP at one of the functions which they were giving and to which members of the SDLP had been invited.

He said that during the course of the visit he expected that references would be made in a speech to the European Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism which would be hostile to our views concerning ratification of this Convention. I put it to him that this was mere sabre rattling as machinery existed for trying, and imprisoning persons apprehended in the South if they are proved guilty of the commission in Northern Ireland since 1976 of a wide range of terrorist offences.

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MESSAGE ENCLAVE

I also mentioned in this connection the Offences against the Persons Act. Houston after a long discussion accepted that this pressure being placed on us was in essence "propagandistic" but he stressed that while in principle the machinery might be adequate to deal with the problem he thought it important, if only for the sake of public opinion in Northern Ireland and here, that we accept extradition.

Daithí Ó Ceallaigh

Daithí Ó Ceallaigh
Press and Information Officer

c.c. Information Section

There are two reasons for the change in Conservative policy towards Northern Ireland according to Houston. Firstly, and he stressed that this is the primary reason, the Conservatives are seeking parliamentary reform and are trying to reach agreement with the Unionists which would lead to their gaining voting support from the Unionists after the General Election. Secondly, the Conservatives consider that it is necessary "to get things moving again" at a political level in Northern Ireland.