

RESTRICTED

277/94

FROM: A J N Tansley
British Embassy, Dublin

DATE: 26 June 1996

cc: PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - B
PS/Michael Ancram (L&B) - B
PS/Sir John Wheeler (L&B) - B
PS/PUS (L&B) - B
PS/Sir David Fell - B
Mr Thomas - B
Mr Bell - B
Mr Hill - B
Mr Maccabe - B
Mr Legge - B
Mr Watkins - B
Mr Wood (L&B) - B
Mr Stephens - B
Mr Lamont, RID - B

ASST 08 424/6
SEC 27 JUN 1996
CENT SEC

27.
Mrs McAuley
LD217

1. "Mr Alexander
in brief."
2. "Mr King" 26.6

Ms Checksfield - B

ROI: POLITICAL ROUND-UP

C

SUMMARY

1. Little criticism so far of the Government's stance on Northern Ireland in the wake of the McCabe murder. Elsewhere, divorce and the EU Presidency dominate the Government's agenda.

DETAIL

Northern Ireland

2. The discovery of a mortar factory in Co Laois, coming after the murder of Garda Jerry McCabe and the Manchester bombing has led to a hardening of public attitudes towards Sinn Fein. The Government has been less than assured in deciding how to respond to this. Its decision to downgrade contacts with Sinn Fein was only taken after a long debate within the Cabinet, with the Taoiseach (supported by de Rossa) urging initially the ending of all official contacts with the party, while the Tanaiste argued for the need to maintain channels of communication.

3. With the exception of the Progressive Democrats (who argue for an end to all contacts with Sinn Fein), this decision has attracted little criticism. But the Government is aware that the chances of Sinn Fein indicating that they no longer support the IRA's armed struggle are small, and that they have in effect set Sinn Fein an impossible precondition for the resumption of dialogue. If the situation in Northern Ireland

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

deteriorates, the Government could well come in for increasing criticism from Fianna Fail, many of whose members argue that it is only by maintaining contact with the Sinn Fein leadership that any hope of restoring the ceasefire is preserved, and that it is no-one's interest to provoke a split in the Republican movement.

4. To compound the Government's difficulties, Fine Gael Ministers have already come in for criticism from their own backbenchers in the wake of the murder of Garda McCabe for not going further in condemning Sinn Fein by not cutting off all contacts. There is a growing view in the party that in courting Sinn Fein, the Government (and its predecessor) have corrupted Irish democracy, and that it should now put law and order at the top of its agenda.

The Divorce Bill

5. Aside from Northern Ireland, the Divorce Bill, which is due to have its first reading in the Dail on 27 June, will take up much of the Government's time over the coming week. This has the potential to re-open divisions particularly within Fianna Fail (and to a lesser extent, Fine Gael). At the time of the referendum in November 1995, opinion polls indicated that Fianna Fail voters opposed the introduction of divorce by a ratio of 49% to 38%. Within Fine Gael, only a small majority (44% to 43%) favoured change.

6. The Fianna Fail front bench is faced with the strong possibility that its backbenchers, particularly those from rural constituencies where opposition to divorce was strongest, might speak out against the Bill, opening embarrassing splits in the party. Party whips have decided it would be counter-productive to attempt to muzzle dissidents, and are hoping that the Bill will be passed as quickly (and uncontroversially) as possible.

7. For the sake of Fine Gael, however, the Government will not be seeking to embarrass Fianna Fail. The Minister for Equality and Law Reform, Mervyn Taylor, has indicated that he is prepared to be flexible in considering amendments to the Bill. To avoid controversial debate, many of the amendments are likely to be considered in committee rather than in the Dail chamber.

Miscellaneous

8. Looking further ahead, the Government will be increasingly preoccupied with their EU Presidency. Great store is being placed on this as a means of transforming the coalition parties' fortunes in the polls, as Ministers exploit to the full their opportunity to make their mark on the European stage. The ending of the UK's policy of non-cooperation, which threatened to disrupt the Irish Presidency, was greeted with considerable relief. That there

RESTRICTED

RESTRICTED

will be two, not one summit, during the Presidency has also been welcomed as a means of keeping the Taoiseach in the spotlight.

9. Elsewhere, the Government can take comfort from a continuing strong economic performance. A succession of encouraging indicators - inflation down to 1.4% in May, increasing employment, and reports that GDP growth figures for 1995 might be revised upward, possibly into double figures, have maintained the mood of optimism.

10. Despite this, the Government still seems to be capable of embarrassing gaffs. Its defeat in the Dail over legislation to pave the way for Dublin's light rail system (resulting from the failure of eight TD's (Five Labour and three Fine Gael) to attend the crucial vote) was seen as a careless and unnecessary mistake. Subsequent efforts to retrieve the situation by forcing the Bill through the Dail with little debate served to damage the Government's image further. That the Minister responsible for this was Michael Lowry has only reinforced the widely held belief that he is an 'unsafe of hands' and out of his depth in Cabinet.

11. Meanwhile, rumours abound that Bertie Ahern is about to bring in his long-awaited front-bench reshuffle. Chief Beneficiaries are predicted to be the chief whip, Dermot Ahern, (on whom Bertie Ahern relies heavily), Jim McDaid, and Willie O'Dea (who has put in a strong performance on law and order issues, particularly the Duncan Extradition). Sile de Valera, the Front Bench spokesman for Arts, Culture and the Gaeltacht, is among those mooted for demotion (for health rather than performance reasons), while Brian Cowen, widely regarded as one of the party's rising stars, is likely to be moved from his position as spokesman on Agriculture, an issue in which he has shown little interest, and on which he has made little impact.

And Finally, The President

12. Speculation that President Robinson might be a candidate for the post of UN Secretary of State, which reached fever pitch during her visit to the US earlier in the month, has still to subside completely, despite a statement from her office on 20 June that she was not in contention and intended to see out her full term as President. Die-hards still cling to the belief that the US Administration will reach a compromise with Bontros Bontros Ghali allowing him to stay in position for a further one or two years, thus opening the way for Mary Robinson. We shall see?

(Signed)
A J N Tansley

RESTRICTED