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S.H. 11.4.95

5 April 1995

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Mr Sean O hUiginn
Second Secretary
Anglo-Irish Division
HQ

Dear Secretary

Meeting with Jonathan Powell, Chief of staff to Tony Blair MP

I had dinner yesterday evening with Jonathan Powell, at his suggestion. Powell was at dinner in our home shortly after taking up his new post, as I reported briefly at the time. The Embassy party for St Patrick's day was the first such invitation Powell had accepted, so he told me, since taking up his assignment with Blair.

Powell's interest in Ireland has of course been strengthened by his recent assignment in the British Embassy in Washington. He spoke warmly last night of a number of Irish colleagues encountered during his Foreign Office career, especially during his Washington assignment and in Vienna. As I mentioned in my previous report, I myself knew him at the CSCE conference in Stockholm.

My impression is that as manager of Blair's office Powell is in the confidence of the Labour Party leader. Powell's views on Ireland I would place at the sympathetic end - from our point of view - of the spectrum of opinion within the Foreign Office and the NIO. I set out below the main points of our discussion.

Blair's Office

There are now about twenty people working to Powell in Blair's office. Six of these make up the policy staff, led by David Miliband, whose brother works for Gordon Brown and whose

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father was a well-known communist trade unionist. Miliband, who is twenty-nine, is the editor of "Re-inventing The Left", a book published last year which helps to explain the overall direction of Blair's thinking. Three or four people work on the press side under Alistair Campbell, who is a contact of Colin Wrafter's. Angie Hunter, with one helper, manages Blair's diary. Hunter has known Blair for over twenty years and is a political confidante. Other members of the office work on administration, word-processing, and back-up services. Powell spoke warmly of the Embassy's friend Pat McFadden, who handles Irish issues under David Miliband.

Powell commented that Blair's private office is now probably a more weighty organisation than Labour Party Headquarters in Walworth Road. It is two to three times the size of Smith's or Kinnock's staff. Costs are a constant concern. Powell is personally engaged in fund-raising.

The Political Battle

Powell is confident that Labour will win the next election with an overall majority, although not by anything like the margin at present suggested by the opinion polls.

It is likely that Labour's electoral strategy will be based on "themes" more than policies. "Themes" could include suggestions that "the Tories are out of touch" or "the Tories lack fairness". This would be backed up by policies in particular areas. Powell feels that tax and the management of the economy will be very much in voters' minds.

The Conservative strategy is likely to focus on any divergences that can be exposed between Tony Blair and the Labour movement as a whole. There is a strong school of thought among the Conservatives that they should make Heseltine leader. The best estimate is that the simple fact of changing leader would bring a twelve-point gain in the opinion polls - although recent polls, based on preference for party leader, do not bring this out. The counter-argument to a change of leader, from a Conservative point of view, is that an upheaval in the party would destroy the political gains to be made from tax cuts this autumn. Powell personally seems to incline to the view that John Major is "a survivor" and can hold on.

As to the date for a general election, Labour's best guess at present is spring or autumn of 1996.

I asked Powell how Northern Ireland is likely to impact on the election. He said that all the professional polling advice is that the impact will be minimal. Tony Blair himself believes that it will benefit the Prime Minister, because the issue has brought out his better qualities.

In the event of a Labour victory, Powell feels that there could be defections from the Conservative Party by some of the one-nation pro-European Conservatives. He mentioned Alan Howarth, and in a less definite way Hugh Dykes and even Ted Heath. An "SDP-type" split cannot be ruled out if the party moves further to the right.

Labour Policy on Ireland

Powell said that Tony Blair's objective is to offer full support to the Government and to be ready, after a change of Government, to implement the very same policy. "No scintilla of light" should appear between Conservative and Labour policy at this time.

Blair has on several occasions prevented Mo Mowlam from taking steps of a more adventurous kind. Powell implied, for example, that Mowlam would have been ready to meet Sinn Fein in recent weeks but has been restrained by Blair. The debate as to whether Labour could "do more here or there" is likely to continue.

Powell's tone suggested to me that Mo Mowlam's stock is high with Tony Blair. Powell speculated, for example, on whether Mowlam "would agree to be Secretary of State" in a Labour Government - the implied alternative being an even more important position in Government. There were hints that John Spellar, one of Mowlam's deputies, is not in great favour with Blair and that the overall make-up of a team of Northern Ireland Ministers might be very different from the present frontbench team.

Under a Labour Government, Powell feels, the Conservative Party would move to the right on Northern Ireland (as on other issues - see above). This could make life difficult for Labour, especially if Northern Ireland is relatively far down the new Government's political agenda - which to a degree is inevitable.

Reflecting aloud, Powell wondered whether these disadvantages would out-weigh, from our own (Irish Government) point of view, Labour's absence of ties to the Unionists and greater sympathy for the Nationalist viewpoint. On this latter issue, Powell commented that Mo Mowlam has mentioned that she is getting very little pressure from the more Nationalist of the Labour MPs.

Powell is of the view that Labour would wish to see the maximum degree of progress in Northern Ireland under the present Conservative Government. [Comment: Maurice and Mary Keen of the BIA pointed out to me in Oxford at the weekend that Mo Mowlam, with whom Mary has had a detailed discussion, is anxious to see rapid progress in the North and is free of the desire to make political capital for the Labour Party out of any failure by the Conservatives to make progress.]

To reassure me about Labour's determination to uphold the approach represented by the Frameworks, Powell mentioned that there has already been extensive contact between Labour and John Chilcot. [Comment: this brought back to mind a stray remark of Paul Murphy to the effect that he was in the Goring Hotel recently - beside our house in Victoria Square - with John Chilcot.]

Powell said that John Chilcot is likely to stay on at the NIO but that Quentin Thomas is likely to leave. Labour is conscious - as of course is Powell himself, given his Washington background - that the complex approach represented by the Frameworks depends to a large degree on the personal commitment of Ministers and the availability of expertise of the kind Chilcot represents.

Labour and the SDLP

As Powell was evidently well-disposed to our position, I gently explored with him Labour's relationship with the SDLP and the degree of priority which relations with the SDLP enjoy with the frontbench team.

Powell said that Blair sat next to John Hume at a socialist event in Madrid three weeks ago. Blair is fully conscious of the central role of the SDLP in present political circumstances and is fully committed to maintaining the Labour\SDLP relationship. Labour is aware of, but can cope with, certain differences of opinion among "SDLP factions". If the SDLP is a middle-class party, "Tony Blair himself is middle-class; or even upper-class!" All of this, Powell observed, is said in the context of the present peace process. Perhaps in twenty years time, Northern Ireland will have a different kind of politics.

I mentioned that the frontbench team is keeping its finger on the pulse of political developments in the Unionist community, both at party political and trade union level. I asked whether the Labour Party sees prospects of a new political party on the Unionist side, based on the PUP or possibly the PUP and UDP, which might have something in common with Labour. [Comment: this question was based on a briefing given me by John Spellar and also on casual remarks by Paul Murphy.]

Powell reacted very strongly to these suggestions, in a negative sense. He said that Blair's office "has not been informed" of any contacts of the kind I have mentioned and alluded darkly to the need for party discipline, as demonstrated in recent days [comment: a reference to the dismissal of Ann Clwyd and Jim Cousins for disobeying the Whips].

I went out of my way to emphasise that what has been involved, as far as we are aware, is simply an effort to keep in touch with different strands of thinking.

Powell went on to be dismissive of the influence on Irish policy of such MPs as Kate Hoey and Harry Barnes. He underlined very forcefully that Tony Blair and the Labour Party are opposed to any attempt to produce an internal settlement in Northern Ireland.

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The Unionists

From his time at the British Embassy in Washington, Powell is personally acquainted with most of the Unionist politicians. Not surprisingly, he regards Maginnis as the most reasonable of the group. Ross he sees as a limited man, and not open-minded towards Nationalists. Powell considers that Maginnis, Ross, Smyth, and David Trimble are in essence social democrats whereas John Taylor is at heart a Tory. [Comment: this may shed some light on British Government attitudes towards the UUP succession.]

As regards the DUP, Powell feels that some of the younger members, such as Gregory Campbell, are potentially easier to deal with than Peter Robinson, who is "worse than Paisley". Powell noted that Robinson has been taking a close interest in the PUP-UDP phenomenon, which is a sign that the new parties on the Unionist side have tapped a vein within Unionism which will be of significance in the future.

Blair at Chatham House

When we left the restaurant at 11.00 p.m., Powell went back to the House of Commons to finish work on a speech which Tony Blair is to deliver today on Europe.

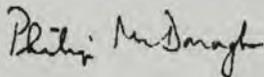
It seems that this speech is designed to state "a philosophy rather than a policy": to draw on historical examples to show that the people of this island are Europeans.

Powell called on a number of well-known historians such as Sir Michael Howard for assistance with the speech. Although he was "approaching them out of the blue", they showed a great willingness to help. There has been a similar reaction in other cases from retired civil servants. Powell takes this as evidence that in the middle classes and the establishment the normal thing now is to support Labour rather than the Conservatives.

Powell also mentioned that Sir Leon Brittan has been helpful to the Labour leadership.

As we were parting outside the Houses of Parliament, I commented on the long hours worked in Blair's office. Powell assured me that Blair paces himself carefully - more so it seems than either Kinnock or Smith - and generally does not arrive in the office before ten a.m.!

Yours sincerely



Philip McDonagh
Counsellor