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UNDER/ SEC 46713
13 MAR 1998
CENT SEC

FROM: C G MACCABE
POLITICAL AFFAIRS DIVISION
12 March 1998

ASST/ SEC
24 MAR 1998
C.C.R.U.

ASST SEC DB 413/3
19 MAR 1998
CENT SEC

- cc PS/Mr Murphy (B&L)
- PS/Mr Ingram (B&L)
- PS/Mr Worthington (L)
- PS/Lord Dubs (L)
- PS/PUS (B&L)
- PS/Mr Semple
- Mr Thomas
- Mr Steele
- Mr Stephens
- Mr Bell
- Mr Watkins
- Mr McCusker
- Mr Kelly
- Mr Hill
- Mr Beeton
- Mr Brooker
- Mr Ferguson
- Mr Howard
- Mr Warner
- Ms Healy
- Mr Sanderson, CO
- Mr Fergusson, RID
- HMA, Dublin

1. a Mr ~~Smith~~ ^{P. 18/3}

2. Mr ~~Howe~~ ^{20/3}

3. L ~~Canavan~~ ²⁴⁻³

13-3

PS/Secretary of State (B&L)

PUBLIC OPINION

This is PAB's third review of local opinion in the run-up to the referendum.

Summary

2. There is still a great deal of public scepticism about the prospect of achieving a political settlement in time for a referendum in May. The Hearts and Minds opinion poll yielded few surprises, showing that most people rate the chances of reaching an agreement as very low, while continuing to support the parties actually in the Talks. The Home Secretary's decision on Roisin McAliskey, sandwiched (as it appeared to some) between Bloody Sunday and the Employment Equality Review announcements, was denounced by unionists as a further sop to

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republicans. Nationalists, on the other hand, remain to be convinced that the Government is really serious about pursuing the equality agenda contained in its election manifesto. Sinn Fein's plans for re-entry to the Talks attracted relatively little interest, despite their efforts to hype up the meeting at Downing Street.

3. The senselessness of the double murder in Poyntzpass struck a chord right across the community. After the shock of such a callous act, the determination of the local residents to look forward in a fresh spirit of reconciliation, coupled with the arrest and charging of four suspects, helped to raise the community's morale a little.

The Unionists

4. Attitudes within the unionist community continue to harden. Community leaders report growing sectarianism in working class areas, while clergy with middle-class congregations report increasing unease about the outcome of the Talks. Throughout the unionist community there is a general feeling of frustration, based on the unshakeable belief that the IRA is not committed to a peaceful settlement and that HMG is making too many concessions to Sinn Fein, and to terrorists, both republican and loyalist.

5. Unionist nervousness about the form of any North/South bodies has increased the pressure on the UUP, and reduced the scope for further movement before the Party's AGM on 21 March. The DUP and UKUP continue to garner support, although there is no sign of a large swing to either party. Most unionists are waiting to see the colour of any agreement before making up their minds and as the Hearts and Minds poll showed, a sizeable proportion of unionist voters are confident that David Trimble will not sell them out. But our sense is that many of those who six months ago would have been solid supporters of almost any reasonable agreement, will now need a lot of convincing before they cast a "yes" vote.

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The Nationalists

6. Despite unionist fears that too many concessions are being made to them, nationalists still feel there is a long way to go on the equality agenda, including policing. The decision on Roisin McAliskey was widely welcomed, though there were also predictable complaints about her being imprisoned in the first place. Nationalists still doubt that the unionists are prepared to compromise - unionist anxiety about yesterday's Strand III paper has reinforced this perception - and want the two Governments to drive the process on. The marching season continues to cast a long shadow; most nationalists think it will be the toughest yet, a view shared by many unionists.

7. Interest in Sinn Fein's participation in the Talks had fallen off sharply, until today's meeting with the Prime Minister. Even Gerry Adams' article in 'Ireland on Sunday', billed as a forward-thinking piece (in republican terms at least), attracted surprisingly little attention. An interesting feature of the article, however, was Adams' repeated use of the term "nationalists" rather than "republicans", perhaps signalling Sinn Fein's belief that it is capable of capturing yet more of the Catholic middle ground. Meanwhile, the SDLP is continuing to adopt a "business as usual" approach to the Talks, despite indications that Sinn Fein enjoys the support of the bulk of young nationalist voters, particularly school leavers.

Conclusion

8. The mood in the community remains fragile. The perception that the Talks process is largely irrelevant, and mainly about pandering to the extremists, needs to be challenged. As the 'It's Your Choice' message starts to get through, this should begin to happen.

Chris Maccabe

C G MACCABE
SH EXT 27085

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