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REPUBLIC OF IRELAND: SECOND IMPRESSIONS

Her Majesty's ambassador at Dublin to the
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

SUMMARY

1. Since my last tour in Dublin 20 years ago much has changed and the pace of change may be accelerating. There is more wealth but it is less evenly distributed. The possibility of quick money has corroded public and commercial life, and contributed to a deep cynicism about politicians and the political system. Ireland is becoming suburbanized, and the Catholic church's influence has declined perceptibly (paragraphs 1-5).
2. Ireland is also a more self-confident place. The Irish are less hidebound by the past and membership of the European Community has enabled them to get out from under Britain. They are enthusiastic Europeans and proud of things Irish. Thickened contacts over the years have helped ease the relationship with Britain (paragraphs 6-7).
3. While belief in easy solutions in Northern Ireland has waned, faith in the virtue and inevitability of Irish unity persists. Few have reconciled themselves to the logic of the proposition that unification would depend on consent. Most people ignore the North, but there is unconditional condemnation of PIRA and violence (paragraphs 8-9).
4. The traditional vision of Irishness has been overwhelmed by economic and social changes and Community membership. The Irish risk losing one identity without gaining another. The boundaries of Irishness are slowly being extended to accommodate the alternative tradition. But there is virtually no consideration of what unity would entail for the Republic. President Robinson's election reflects the breaking of old moulds (paragraphs 10-12).
5. Changes are overtaking the political parties, but not yet. Pending a new political realignment, weak governments could predominate. Mr Haughey remains an enigma, possibly an empty one. He and his successor face big problems ahead (paragraphs 13-15).

BRITISH EMBASSY

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9 January 1992

The Rt Hon Douglas Hurd CBE MP
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
LONDON

Sir

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND: SECOND IMPRESSIONS

1. I served in Dublin between 1970 and 1973, and in Belfast from 1981 to 1983. These are therefore my second impressions of the Republic, and my third of "this island", as the local euphemism has it.

2. On the surface, much remains unchanged from twenty years ago. Society is small and its concerns are parochial. Farming is still the major economic activity, and a rural way of life continues in an underpopulated countryside (by British standards, that is). Many are forced to emigrate to find work. Average incomes are well below the EC average. When defences are down all but a handful of people profess a faith in a united Ireland. The politicians and parties which ran the state twenty years ago are still in place, and C J Haughey dominates the scene as he did at the time of the arms trial. Divorce and abortion are banned by the Constitution and contraceptives are not freely available. The Irish still display a maddening capacity for double-think, evasion and humbug. Finally, the tangled love-hate relationship with the English (not the 'genuine' Scots, Welsh or even Northern Unionists) continues. So do the ambiguities: when the British Ambassador, at the invitation of the local British Legion and in the presence of the President's and Taoiseach's representatives, leaves the viceregal paw at (Church of Ireland) St Patrick's to read the lesson to a Remembrance Day congregation of (largely Catholic) loyal citizens of the Republic who fought for Britain, the event makes prime-time television.

3. Yet underneath much has changed, and I suspect the change is accelerating. The Republic is a richer place than it was in 1970, and wealth is much less evenly distributed. Then, the rich were essentially those who had inherited money or made it through Dublin property speculation in the 1960s. Today there is a lot of cash sloshing around the system - from EC payments, from speculation in land during the boom years, from foreign investment and from old-fashioned financial bubbles. Quite a few people have acquired wealth, and are not slow to flaunt it. At the same time, unemployment is rife in bleak new housing estates, most obviously on the outskirts of Dublin. The Garda are beginning to worry about social stability in these conditions, especially if the traditional safety valve of

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emigration remains blocked by recession in Britain and the United States. They and the politicians doubt that social alienation will assume a nationalist Republican guise. I hope they are right.

4. It is not just those at the bottom of the heap who find these contrasts a dangerous affront. The possibility of making money quickly has corroded the morals of public and commercial life. The Civil Service, the Garda and the Army retain their integrity. So does most of the private sector. But abuses of power, frauds and diversions of taxpayers' money into private pockets, culminating in the scandals of 1991, have contributed to a deep cynicism about politicians and, more important, the political system. 'Stroke politics', to use the local term, have been associated with Mr Haughey's clique in Fianna Fail since the early 1960s, and it is no coincidence that the scandals have come to a head while he is Taoiseach. But the cynicism also reflects the conformism of Irish politics (deriving partly from the PR system), the tendency towards "Irish solutions" which at best half-resolve problems, and the perceived ineffectualness of Government.

5. Prosperity has brought other social changes. Dublin itself is brighter and smarter than it was and people are noticeably better off here and, so far as I can judge, outside the capital. Thanks largely to EC grants, the rural housing stock has been totally renewed. But the Common Agricultural Policy, together with growing personal expectations which small farming cannot satisfy, has also brought about a drift from the land. Like much of the rest of Europe, Ireland is becoming suburbanized. Society is still surprisingly cohesive, but traditional values - family life, sexual mores etc - have relaxed. Though it remains a force to be reckoned with, the influence of the Catholic Church has declined perceptibly since 1970. Then, over 90% of the population regularly attended mass: now, fewer than 50% do so, and very few young people. I suspect people have also put more money into their children's education - always regarded here as a key to a better life, often abroad. The quality is high, and 60% of children go through the tertiary level. This majority, bright and well-educated, forms one of the Republic's great strengths.

6. Other changes are more subtle. I find the Republic a more self-confident place than it was twenty years ago. Then, the tendency was to look back to a golden past - a rural Arcadia, Joycean Dublin, the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, the War of Independence, according to taste - to deplore the present and to fear the future. People felt almost physically oppressed by Britain, which dominated them socially and economically. This has all changed, and for the better. There is a greater sense of optimism about the future, despite the cynicism and the evident social and economic problems. Membership of the European Community has enabled the Irish to get out from under Britain psychologically and culturally, as Jack Lynch, the Taoiseach at the time of our joint accession, hoped it would. To adapt a phrase of Joyce's, the shortest road to Tara has been shown to lie through Brussels. The Irish have taken to the European ideal easily and enthusiastically - and not only because of the EC money they assiduously and effectively solicit. There is a new pride in things Irish, including the language,

and a wish to develop a culture which is distinctive but subsumes the British legacy. The younger generation, in particular, seem able to define their Irishness through culture rather than nationalism.

7. As a result, attitudes towards Britain are notably more relaxed. When I arrived in the Embassy in early 1970, contacts between London and Dublin officialdom were rare indeed, and serious business was limited to the annual haggle over butter quotas. I can recall no senior visitors to Dublin during nearly four years. Membership of the EC, and the troubles in the North, have changed all that. Ministers and officials meet in Brussels on a weekly basis, and our London colleagues often know their Dublin counterparts far better than does the Embassy. The Anglo-Irish Agreement regularly throws Ministers and senior officials together, and the Secretariat in Belfast provides a basis for daily contact. British Ministers visit Dublin frequently (almost one a week since September), the Prime Minister was here in December, two members of the Royal Family paid private (but well publicized) visits in the autumn and the President has just paid her third official visit to the United Kingdom. The effect of all this personal contact on the Irish (and on the British) is not to be underestimated. The chips on Irish shoulders have started to heal, and the patronising attitudes of the English, so resented here, have waned. Each of us finds evidence of humbug and double-think in the other's behaviour, but the incidence has declined.

8. Irish views about Northern Ireland have changed too. The belief in easy solutions has long gone. As in Britain, most people prefer not to think about the North, and are content to cultivate their patch in the Republic. But the same people, and the three main political parties, retain an ultimate belief in the virtue and the inevitability of Irish unity. Talking to an Irishman about unity is like talking to a Eurocrat about Community competence. They do not know when it will happen ("not in my lifetime" is the standard response), how it will come about or what it will look like. But happen it will, and any suggestion to the contrary is regarded as naive and morally unsound. Like time's arrow, political change can point only in one direction. Formally (as in the Anglo-Irish Agreement) the Irish accept that unification would depend upon the consent of the Unionists. But few have reconciled themselves to the logic of this proposition - that a majority in the North, including many Catholics, regard themselves as British, and that in a democratic society they cannot be bombed/bullied/voted into new political arrangements they will not accept. When such unwelcome truths are pointed out the usual reaction is a glazed look and the pious hope that it will all be sorted out, perhaps in the context of a "Europe of the regions". Some, especially in Fianna Fail and including one or two Ministers, say that "the Unionists can no longer/not again be allowed to block progress", or that we, the British, should educate them in the delights of unity. The Taoiseach, in what I suspect is a variant of this line, talks of re-examining "the totality of relationships" between the UK and the Republic.

9. In truth, most people in the South - including the Government, the Civil Service and the Department of Foreign Affairs - remain deeply ignorant of the North, and depressingly unwilling to learn. There are exceptions, and notable

ones. But most can afford to ignore the North. Those who live in the border counties, and cannot, are notably clearer in their minds. A few, throughout the state, are prepared to support PIRA in seeking unity by force. A rather larger number, difficult to quantify, are ready to connive at violence. But here again attitudes have changed. People, and the press, are ready now to condemn PIRA without a compensating swipe at the "British forces of oppression". There is a widespread recognition that violence is evil and solves nothing, and occasionally a real sense of shame at what the IRA is doing in the name of Irish unity. Neither the man in the street nor (most) politicians are yet ready to acknowledge that the violence in the North is something which threatens them and which they have an interest, and a duty, to help bring to an end by all means in their power - another example of Irish evasion. But the old attitude of nod and wink is disappearing: I do not believe that it seriously inhibits the Garda or the Army in their pursuit of PIRA in the South. Lack of gut commitment, and of resources, is the key.

10. If Irish attitudes to the British and the North are changing, so too are their own perceptions of themselves, not least because Irish nationalism has for so long been defined against the norm of Englishness. Other factors are at play. De Valera's escapist vision of an Ireland Catholic, Gaelic, free and untainted by foreign entanglements, a land of small, self-sufficient and frugal farmers living an exemplary family life, nevertheless embodied a set of ideals to which many subscribed, and still subscribe. Twenty years ago it was just about possible to relate to the cloudcuckooland Dev painted: it no longer is. Economic and social conditions have changed radically, and are continuing to change. Nor is membership of a developing European Community easily reconciled with the traditional concepts of Irish society, sovereignty and neutrality: indeed, in virtually all respects it contradicts them. Yet all material calculations point to the benefit of the Republic's becoming part of an integrated Europe, and the more integrated the better. At the heart of these tensions lies the question what, in 1992, it means to be an Irishman. The Irish risk losing one identity without gaining another. So far, there is surprisingly little debate. It is, I suppose, conceivable that time and a new generation may resolve the tensions without the need to address them squarely. With luck, they might make it easier to live with the continuation of partition too.

11. In one important direction the boundaries of Irishness are slowly being extended: many small signs - the refurbishment of Dublin Castle and the 1914-18 War Memorial, the restoration of the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham, the cautious presence of official representatives at Remembrance Sunday and so on - indicate that the alternative tradition, snuffed out in 1916, is regaining legitimacy. It is becoming easier for Protestants with English names to regard themselves as 'real' Irishmen and citizens of the Republic. For years after 1922 many such people lived in the twilight. The implications for them, and for the relationship with Britain, are considerable. Further down the road there could be implications for Unionists in the North. But it is early days yet, and there has been no serious debate here about what unification would mean. People talk about abolition of

the claim to the North as a great sacrifice. But a serious approach to unity would entail far more radical reorientations: the redesigning of the state, a re-evaluation of Irish social and political values and a reopening of the constitutional position vis-à-vis Britain. Despite the tensions forced on the Republic by EC membership, I see few if any signs of a willingness to tackle such fundamental and difficult questions.

12. President Robinson's election reflected an underlying awareness that old moulds have been broken before new ones have been designed. She has gone out of her way to extend the umbrella of Irishness; to stress an inclusive interpretation of it rather than Dev's exclusive one; to use the Presidency to legitimize social groups previously cold-shouldered or undervalued - including the Unionists, if they would have her; and to forge a link between the Ireland she represents and Irish communities abroad. She has not attempted to draw a limit to Irishness: I doubt she knows where she would put it, any more than do others.

13. Where does all this leave the political parties? It seems odd that despite all the changes of the last decades Fianna Fail and Fine Gael reflect essentially the civil war divide, and Labour wallows in third place. The answer seems to be that changes are overtaking them all, but not yet. People are still born into Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, rather than choosing between party platforms à la carte. All three have strong grass-roots organizations and live on local issues and local loyalties. Until very recently Fianna Fail regarded themselves as the natural government and sole guardians of the sacred flame of Irish nationalism. Some Fianna Failers still do. But their defeat in the 1990 Presidential election, an unpopular coalition arrangement and the realization that they are unlikely to win an outright Dail majority again have ended such pretensions. There is much dissatisfaction with the party leader and uncertainty whether to try to develop policies on social and economic issues. Fine Gael is in terrible trouble, under lacklustre leadership and with no clear message to the electorate. Labour, under an effective leader, has been doing better, but it has a narrow base outside Dublin and public suspicion of socialism - even the centrist Irish version - is strong. The Dublin pundits forecast a wholesale political realignment, perhaps with Fine Gael forming the nucleus of a right-wing party and Fianna Fail elements, with Labour, a left-wing grouping. Jack Lynch told me the other week that it was too soon for such a reshuffle: memories of the civil war and post-civil war era were too recent. I think that is right, and that the present system has an inertia of its own. But until some realignment comes about, the Republic is likely to be run by a succession of minority or coalition governments which could prove weak and indecisive.

14. As noted earlier, one constant star in the local firmament is the Taoiseach, Charles Haughey. He is ill and under great pressure to go: only the inability of Fianna Fail to agree a successor keeps him there. He remains as big an enigma to me as he did twenty years ago. He is quick-witted, intelligent, as effective an administrator as he is a politician, decisive, ambitious and something of a strategist. As one Minister put it to me, when you look round the Cabinet table there is no-one to touch him. But what else is there to him, besides a wish to

leave his name in the history books? Increasingly, I suspect there may be not much at all, and that without power he would be nothing - which may be why he clings onto power so stubbornly.

15. He, or his successor, has significant problems to tackle in the years ahead. The first, and most pressing, is the economy. The standard optimistic view is that a backbone of farming/food processing, supplemented by EC funds and the development of further niche industries (electronics, pharmaceuticals, financial services) will see the country through, especially if remittances hold up and emigration can resume. Others - notably the Governor of the Central Bank - question this assessment and worry that the Republic may become (to put it crudely) a theme park and leisure centre for richer Europeans, with a farming population kept on the land by means of an EC dole. Certainly, the chance of creating significant numbers of secure new jobs is bleak. The second set of problems lies in the social conditions this implies: entrenched unemployment (currently over 20% of the labour force is without work), underemployment and a disincentive to enterprise and self-help. Thirdly, and only just over the horizon, are the problems arising from the North. The security effort along the border already imposes significant burdens on a society of 3.5 million people. An extension of the troubles into the South would be divisive as well as costly. Few in the Republic lie awake at night worrying about this possibility, because they expect the British Government to keep the lid on the North. But there is deep-seated mistrust of Britain in the long term, not necessarily of our ill-will, but of the possibility that at some stage a British Government will simply lose interest or heart in the Irish question, or go for a facile and mistaken solution. Hence the especial importance they attach to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and their ability to talk to British Ministers and officials regularly and openly.

16. What are the implications of all this for the UK? We have enormous and direct interests here. We need Irish help over security along the border and, to a lesser extent, against terrorism in Britain. We need their acquiescence, at least, over British policies in Northern Ireland, and with luck their assistance in handling the nationalist community. We have fish to fry with them in the Community. And we have a strong interest in the continued stability and economic well-being of the Republic, not only because of the implications of instability here for the North and for Britain itself, but also because the Republic lies seventh in our export league table and takes more British goods than do Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South America combined.

17. To further these interests we need to continue to soothe away the scars of our past relationship. They are beginning to heal over. But the Irish are quick to notice or invent slights, and to assume that we take them for granted. They need constant reassurance that we take them and their concerns seriously, that we regard them as equals, that we seek and weigh their advice and views, and above all that we are not going to walk away from them and from the North. We should look for opportunities to normalize the relationship (we need never fear that we shall become just another foreign country), above all by encouraging senior visitors in both directions (and East-West as well as North-South), by talking straight and often and by emphasising common interests where they

exist. There is always room for improvement in a relationship which is now - largely I suspect because of the Prime Minister's and Mr Brooke's personal qualities - perhaps better than it ever has been. Equally important, however, we need to prepare the soundest possible basis against the day, virtually inevitable, when despite all our precautions we run hard against another Irish rock.

18. I am sending copies of this despatch to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Attorney-General, to the Secretary of the Cabinet and to Her Majesty's Representatives at Washington, the Holy See, Ottawa, Canberra, other EC Posts and UKREP Brussels.

I am, Sir,
Yours faithfully

David Blatherwick

D E S Blatherwick