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MIPT: ANGLO-IRISH SUMMIT, 26 FEBRUARY: SCENE-SETTER

SUMMARY

1. THE TAOISEACH'S REPLACEMENT OF HAUGHEY'S MINISTERS HAS LEFT MANY IN FIANNA FAIL DISGRUNTLED. WHILE HIS PARTY AND PERSONAL POPULARITY RATINGS HAVE RISEN, HE HAS BEEN DRIVEN OFF HIS MAIN CONCERN (JOBS) BY THE ABORTION CRISIS, WHICH RAISES DIFFICULT QUESTIONS INCLUDING OVER THE MAASTRICHT TREATY. THE CRISIS MAY REDUCE THE TAOISEACH'S SCOPE FOR FLEXIBILITY ON NORTHERN IRELAND, WHERE HE IS LIKELY TO BE INFLUENCED BY SDLP VIEWS.

DETAIL

2. TWO WEEKS HAVE ELAPSED SINCE ALBERT REYNOLDS WAS APPOINTED TAOISEACH ON 11 FEBRUARY. HIS FIRST ACT WAS TO APPOINT A MINISTERIAL TEAM COMPRISING HIS OWN SUPPORTERS AND HAUGHEY'S OPPONENTS, AND TO DEMOTE OTHER SENIOR FIGURES OR SEND THEM TO THE BACK BENCHES. THE BLOOD HAS STILL NOT DRIED: LAST WEEK REYNOLDS DROPPED AN ATTEMPT TO REPLACE THE PARLIAMENTARY PARTY CHAIRMAN (TUNNEY) WITH HIS OWN NOMINEE WHEN IT BECAME CLEAR THAT IT WOULD NOT SUCCEED WITHOUT A VOTE. IT HAD BEEN EXPECTED THAT, FOLLOWING THE PARTY SQUABBLES OF HAUGHEY'S FINAL MONTHS, HIS SUCCESSOR WOULD MOVE QUICKLY TO UNITE THE PARTY. THE OPPOSITE HAS HAPPENED. SHOULD REYNOLDS' GOVERNMENT GET INTO DIFFICULTIES OVER POLICY ISSUES, HE COULD FIND HIMSELF UNDER ATTACK FROM WITHIN FIANNA FAIL.

3. AN OPINION POLL ON 23 FEBRUARY SUGGESTED THAT THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S STANDING HAD RISEN STRONGLY OVER THE PAST TWO WEEKS. THIS HONEYMOON EFFECT WILL NATURALLY HAVE HEARTENED THE TAOISEACH, THOUGH IN EFFECT FIANNA FAIL HAVE ONLY RECOVERED THE GROUND LOST IN 1991 UNDER HAUGHEY. REYNOLDS' PERSONAL POPULARITY HAS REPORTEDLY ALSO INCREASED. BUT THE PUBLIC HAVE LITTLE YET TO GO ON. WHILE ON HIS APPOINTMENT THE TAOISEACH IDENTIFIED JOBS AS THE MAIN PROBLEM TO TACKLE (UNEMPLOYMENT IS

RUNNING AT OVER 20 PER CENT) AND HAS SIGNALLED THAT HE MIGHT AGREE TO FORM AN ALL-PARTY JOBS FORUM TO DISCUSS UNEMPLOYMENT, HIS GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN ALMOST ENTIRELY PREOCCUPIED WITH THE ABORTION CRISIS, WHICH HIT THEM LIKE A HURRICANE OUT OF A CLEAR SKY. THE FACTS HAVE BEEN WIDELY REPORTED. REYNOLDS HAS CLEVERLY SOUGHT TO MAKE THE MATTER A NON-PARTY ISSUE BY INVITING THE OTHER PARTY LEADERS TO TALKS, BY AVOIDING COMMENT ON THE MERITS OF THE ISSUE AND BY BACKING THE ATTORNEY-GENERAL AND PURSUING THE STATE CASE WHILE AT THE SAME TIME PROVIDING FINANCIAL AID FOR THE FAMILY INVOLVED TO APPEAL. THE CASE IS NOW BEFORE THE SUPREME COURT, AND COULD GO TO THE EUROPEAN COURT (FOR EXAMPLE, TO DECIDE WHETHER THE RIGHT TO TRAVEL WITHIN THE EC TO AVAIL OF SERVICES SHOULD BE APPLIED).

4. WHATEVER THE COURTS DECIDE, THE PROBLEM WILL NOT GO AWAY. ABORTION RAISES ENORMOUS AND BITTER PASSIONS HERE. IT IS HARD TO OVERSTATE THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRESENT CRISIS. AS THE PRESIDENT HAS PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGED, THE IRISH ARE NOT GOOD AT FACING UP TO DIFFICULT MORAL CHOICES. ACCORDING TO A WEEKEND POLL, OVER 30 PER CENT OF THE POPULATION AGREE WITH THE ORDER, ENDORSED BY THE HIGH COURT, RESTRAINING THE RAPE VICTIM IN THE PRESENT CASE FROM SEEKING AN ABORTION ABROAD. OF THE NEARLY 70 PER CENT WHO DISAGREE, FEW WOULD COUNTENANCE ANY ABORTIONS TAKING PLACE LEGALLY IN THE REPUBLIC: THE GREAT MAJORITY FAVOUR AN ABORTION-FREE IRELAND WHICH CONNIVES AT ABORTIONS ON IRISH WOMEN ABROAD. SHOULD THE COURTS ENDORSE THE HIGH COURT'S RULING, THERE WILL BE PRESSURE FOR THE CONSTITUTION TO BE AMENDED SO AS TO ALLOW THIS.

5. A PARTICULAR COMPLICATION RELATES TO THE MAASTRICHT TREATY. THE IRISH PROTOCOL TO THE TREATY PURPORTS TO EXEMPT THE ANTI-ABORTION PROVISIONS OF THE IRISH CONSTITUTION FROM THE EFFECT OF THE TREATY AND EC LAW, IN IRELAND. THE SUPREME COURT'S RULING MAY IN EFFECT SHOW THAT THIS TERRITORIAL RESTRICTION IS UNCONSTITUTIONAL, OR IT MAY ENDORSE IT. IN EITHER CASE, THERE WOULD BE PRESSURE TO AMEND THE TEXT OF THE PROTOCOL, OR THE CONSTITUTION, OR PERHAPS BOTH. AND DEPENDING ON CIRCUMSTANCES, THE RESULT OF THE REFERENDUM ON MAASTRICHT DUE LATER THIS YEAR COULD BE PUT MORE IN DOUBT.

6. THESE COMPLICATIONS WILL INEVITABLY LIMIT THE TAOISEACH'S FREEDOM OF MANOEUVRE OVER NORTHERN IRELAND, AND ON EC MATTERS. CONSERVATIVES OVER ABORTION TEND TO BE CONSERVATIVES OVER NORTHERN IRELAND, NEUTRALITY AND FOREIGN ENTANGLEMENTS TOO.

FIANNA FAIL IS TRADITIONALLY CONSERVATIVE, STATEMENTS BY FIANNA FAIL BACK-BENCHERS HAVE BEEN MARKEDLY MORE CAUTIOUS THAN THOSE BY OPPOSITION DEPUTIES, AND REYNOLDS' CABINET, MOST OF THEM FROM RURAL CONSTITUENCIES, IS PROBABLY MORE CONSERVATIVE THAN HIS PREDECESSOR'S. THERE WILL PROBABLY BE TRADE-OFFS: REYNOLDS MAY FIND HIS FLEXIBILITY OVER NORTHERN IRELAND OR EC MATTERS LIMITED BY HIS NEED TO TAKE ISSUE WITH THE ANTI-ABORTION LOBBY. CONVERSELY, HE MAY DECIDE TO TAKE A TOUGH LINE AGAINST ABORTION IN ORDER TO LEAVE HIS HANDS FREER ELSEWHERE.

7. WHILE THE ABORTION ISSUE WILL BE MUCH ON THE TAOISEACH'S MIND, HIS MAIN PURPOSES IN MEETING THE PRIME MINISTER WILL BE TO RESUME THEIR FRIENDSHIP, SOUND OUT HIS VIEWS ON NORTHERN IRELAND AND STRESS THE NEED FOR SOLUTIONS. WE MAY FIND THAT HIS OWN RELATIVE INEXPERIENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS LEAVES HIM SUSCEPTIBLE TO TRADITIONAL FIANNA FAIL AND SDLP ATTITUDES, ESPECIALLY ON SUCH THINGS AS PARTITION (ARTICLES 2 AND 3) AND SECURITY/CONFIDENCE ISSUES. BUT HE WILL BE AWARE OF THE NEED TO PROVE HIMSELF TO BE HIS OWN MAN.

BLATHERWICK

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