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REYNOLDS' FIRST HUNDRED DAYS

SUMMARY

1. REYNOLDS' FIRST 100 DAYS OVERSHADOWED BY THE ABORTION ISSUE, WHICH HAS DISTRACTED HIS GOVERNMENT FROM ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AND COULD AFFECT IRISH HANDLING OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND TALKS. THE GOVERNMENT'S OVERRIDING PRIORITY IS TO SECURE POPULAR APPROVAL OF THE MAASTRICHT TREATY ON 18 JUNE, AND THE ODDS ARE THAT IT WILL SUCCEED. THE FIANNA FAIL/PD COALITION LOOKS LESS STABLE THAN UNDER HAUGHEY. REYNOLDS' HEART IS IN THE RIGHT PLACE OVER NORTHERN IRELAND, BUT TOO EARLY TO TELL WHETHER SECURITY COOPERATION WILL IMPROVE. HIS STRATEGY ON MAASTRICHT ENTAILS RISKS, BUT IF IT SUCCEEDS HIS POSITION WILL BE MUCH MORE SECURE.

DETAIL

2. SINCE ALBERT REYNOLDS WAS ELECTED TAOISEACH ON 11 FEBRUARY HE AND HIS GOVERNMENT HAVE BEEN BESET BY POLITICAL PROBLEMS. THEY ARE BY NO MEANS OVER.

3. THE ABORTION ISSUE, WHICH HIT THE GOVERNMENT WITHOUT WARNING THE DAY AFTER IT TOOK OFFICE, IMMEDIATELY KNOCKED THEM OFF COURSE AND HAS DOMINATED THE POLITICAL AGENDA EVER SINCE. IT HAS REKINDLED DEEP PASSIONS WHICH EVERYONE HOPED HAD DIED DOWN AFTER A BITTERLY DIVISIVE REFERENDUM IN 1983. THROUGH BAD LUCK AND INEPTITUDE, EVERY TWIST AND TURN BY THE GOVERNMENT TO RESOLVE ITS DIFFICULTIES HAS SERVED ONLY TO COMPOUND THEM. THE LEGAL RAMIFICATIONS ARE COMPLEX, AND LAWYERS' OPINIONS CONTRADICTORY. THE PUBLIC PICTURE HAS BEEN ONE OF A GOVERNMENT REACTING TO EVENTS, AND OF CONFUSED THINKING.

4. MOST IMPORTANT, THE ABORTION ISSUE HAS BECOME ENTANGLED WITH THE MAASTRICHT REFERENDUM SET FOR 18 JUNE. THE NEED TO

SECURE A POSITIVE VOTE IS NOW THE GOVERNMENT'S OVERWHELMING PRIORITY. REYNOLDS HIMSELF DECIDED - IN DEFIANCE OF CONVENTIONAL WISDOM - TO PUSH FOR APPROVAL OF MAASTRICHT BEFORE TACKLING ABORTION LATER THIS YEAR, AND HE HAS STUCK TO HIS GUNS DESPITE CONSIDERABLE PRESSURE TO REVERSE THE ORDER. NEVERTHELESS, HIS APPEAL THAT PEOPLE SHOULD VOTE FOR MAASTRICHT AND TRUST HIM TO SORT OUT ABORTION LATER IS VIEWED WITH SUSPICION BY BOTH THE ANTI-ABORTION AND THE PRO-CHOICE LOBBIES, AND HAS CREATED CONFUSION ABOUT HIS INTENTIONS. THE COALITION AGAINST MAASTRICHT ALSO INCLUDES THOSE WHO FEAR BRUSSELS RULE AND/OR ABANDONMENT OF IRISH NEUTRALITY - STILL A SURPRISINGLY POWERFUL LOBBY. SO FAR THE GOVERNMENT HAS ADDUCED MAINLY NEGATIVE ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF MAASTRICHT (IE THE ECONOMIC RISKS OF BEING LEFT BEHIND THE REST OF THE EC), AND HAS MADE HALF-PROMISES ABOUT THE IR6 BILLION IRELAND ALLEGEDLY STANDS TO GAIN WHICH STRAIN PUBLIC CREDULITY. ITS OPPONENTS ASK WHETHER THE IRISH WISH TO SACRIFICE TRADITIONAL IRISH VALUES FOR A MESS OF POTAGE, ESPECIALLY ONE OF DUBIOUS VALUE. NEVERTHELESS, REYNOLDS' STRATEGY COULD PAY OFF. A RECENT OPINION POLL SUGGESTED 62 PER CENT IN FAVOUR, 10 PER CENT AGAINST, AND 28 PER CENT UNDECIDED. THE MAIN OPPOSITION PARTIES HAVE DECLARED IN FAVOUR OF MAASTRICHT, AS HAVE THE FARMERS' ASSOCIATION AND THE MAIN TRADE UNIONS. THE CONSENSUS AMONG INFORMED PEOPLE IS FOR A ROUGHLY 70-30 VOTE IN FAVOUR. OF COURSE, THEY COULD BE WRONG.

5. ECONOMIC ISSUES HAVE HAD TO TAKE A BACK SEAT. THOUGH GNP IS EXPECTED TO GROW BY 2 PER CENT THIS YEAR, UNEMPLOYMENT, ALREADY OVER 20 PER CENT, CONTINUES TO INCREASE AND THE GOVERNMENT'S ATTEMPTS TO TACKLE IT HAVE BEEN SLOW TO GET UNDER WAY. THE MORE IMPORTANT ITEMS OF BUSINESS SO FAR - THE BUDGET AND THE FINANCE BILL, AN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY ACT AND A GREEN PAPER ON EDUCATION - WERE ALL INHERITED BY REYNOLDS FROM HIS PREDECESSOR. OTHER MATTERS, INCLUDING PROMISED LEGISLATION ON DIVORCE, CONTRACEPTION AND THE LEGALISATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY, HAVE BEEN POSTPONED.

6. AS TO NORTHERN IRELAND, REYNOLDS' HEART IS IN THE RIGHT PLACE. HIS PUBLIC STATEMENTS HAVE BEEN GENERALLY HELPFUL AND HAVE SHOWN SOME ACCEPTANCE OF THE UNIONIST POSITION. BUT HIS KNOWLEDGE OF THE ISSUES IS CURSORY AND HIS PREOCCUPATION WITH ABORTION AND THE EC HAVE LEFT HIM LITTLE TIME TO LEARN, OR TO THINK ABOUT IT. THE SAME TEAM - REYNOLDS, ANDREWS (FOREIGN AFFAIRS) AND FLYNN (JUSTICE) - IS PREOCCUPIED WITH ALL THREE

SUBJECTS AND IT MUST BE OPEN TO QUESTION WHETHER THEY WILL BE ABLE EFFECTIVELY TO HANDLE THE NORTH/SOUTH AND EAST/WEST STRANDS OF THE POLITICAL TALKS IF, AS THE IRISH INSIST, THE TRANSITION FROM STRAND I TAKES PLACE EARLY IN JUNE, BEFORE THE REFERENDUM IS OUT OF THE WAY. ONE OR THE OTHER IS LIKELY TO SUFFER AND IT IS NOT CLEAR WHICH. ANDREWS HIMSELF, A NERVOUS MAN WITH A SHORT FUSE, HAS BEEN UNIMPRESSIVE IN MEETINGS WITH BRITISH MINISTERS AND IN PUBLIC IN DUBLIN.

7. ON SECURITY CO-OPERATION, THERE HAS BEEN A WELCOME CHANGE FROM THE AMBIGUITIES OF HAUGHEY. IT MAY BE A COINCIDENCE, BUT RECENT SIGNIFICANT ARMS FINDS IN THE REPUBLIC BEGAN SHORTLY AFTER REYNOLDS BECAME TAOISEACH. THE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS THAT REYNOLDS AND HIS COLLEAGUES ARE KEEN TO HELP DEFEAT PIRA. BUT IT IS HARD YET TO ASSESS THE RESULT ON THE GROUND. CONSTRAINTS REMAIN ESPECIALLY ON CONTACTS WITH THE BRITISH ARMY. NOR HAS REYNOLDS YET BEEN PRESENTED WITH DIFFICULT DECISIONS, FOR EXAMPLE OVER AN EXTRADITION CASE.

8. DESPITE THE MUDDLE OVER ABORTION, A RECENT POLL SUGGESTS THAT REYNOLDS' POPULARITY, AND FIANNA FAIL'S, HAVE RISEN SHARPLY SINCE HE TOOK OFFICE. HE IS REGARDED AS A SENSIBLE AND DECENT MAN, AND THE CONTRAST WITH HAUGHEY CONTINUES TO HELP HIM. HIS REPLACEMENT OF PRACTICALLY ALL HAUGHEY'S TEAM HAS SUCCEEDED IN MARKING A FRESH START, AND HE AND HIS GOVERNMENT CONTINUE TO ENJOY A HONEYMOON PERIOD. THEY ARE HELPED BY THE APPARENT INABILITY OF THE OPPOSITION TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THEIR DIFFICULTIES: FINE GAEL HAS LOST ITS WAY AND SPRING, THE LABOUR PARTY LEADER, WHO TACKLED HAUGHEY WITH SUCCESS, SEEMS UNABLE TO GET HIS TEETH INTO REYNOLDS' ANKLES (SOME BELIEVE HE IS LOOKING TO REPLACE THE PDS AS FIANNA FAIL'S COALITION PARTNER - UNLIKELY BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE). BUT SOME OF THOSE REYNOLDS DISMISSED IN FEBRUARY ARE NURSING THEIR RESENTMENT ON THE BACKBENCHES AND WAITING FOR SIGNS OF VULNERABILITY. WHILE HIS CRITICISMS OF HIS COALITION PARTNERS AND HIS CALLS FOR A FIANNA FAIL MAJORITY GOVERNMENT HAVE DELIGHTED HIS OWN PARTY, THEY HAVE CAUSED STRAINS WITHIN THE COALITION. THESE COULD BECOME INTOLERABLE, FOR EXAMPLE OVER THE ABORTION ISSUE (WHERE THE PDS TAKE A MORE LIBERAL LINE THAN FIANNA FAIL), OR IN THE LONG-RUNNING BEEF TRIBUNAL: BOTH O'MALLEY, THE PD LEADER, AND REYNOLDS ARE DUE TO GIVE EVIDENCE SOON ABOUT CREDIT GUARANTEES GIVEN BY REYNOLDS AS FINANCE MINISTER IN 1987-88, AND CRITICIZED BY O'MALLEY THEN IN OPPOSITION.

9. ABORTION HAS LOOMED SO LARGE THAT IT MAKES THE GOVERNMENT'S PERFORMANCE DIFFICULT TO ASSESS. REYNOLDS AND HIS TEAM HAVE FACED UP TO A NUMBER OF ISSUES - FOR EXAMPLE DAIL REFORM, THE NICKY KELLY CASE AND PRESSURES TO SUPPORT AN AILING MEAT PROCESSING FIRM IN THE FIANNA FAIL HEARTLAND - WITH UNACCUSTOMED RESOLUTION. THERE ARE SIGNS OF FRESH MINDS BEING BROUGHT TO BEAR IN A PRAGMATIC WAY. THE OPENNESS OF REYNOLDS' STYLE HAS GONE DOWN WELL AFTER HAUGHEY'S EVASIONS AND AUTOCRATIC HABITS. THE ABORTION CONTROVERSY HAS BROUGHT OUT REYNOLDS' SLOWNESS TO MAKE UP HIS MIND UNTIL HE IS SURE OF THE ARGUMENTS AND HIS DETERMINATION TO STICK TO A DECISION ONCE TAKEN. AND HIS BOLDNESS IN GOING FOR MAASTRICHT BEFORE SETTling ABORTION CONFIRMS HIS REPUTATION AS SOMETHING OF A GAMBLER.

10. A NEGATIVE VOTE OVER MAASTRICHT, OR EVEN AN UNCONVINCING VICTORY, WOULD SERIOUSLY WEAKEN THE GOVERNMENT. AT THE LEAST, THEY WOULD FIND IT MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TO HANDLE THE NORTHERN IRELAND POLITICAL TALKS, AND THEIR POLITICAL ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE WOULD BE REDUCED. AT WORST, THE FUTURE OF THE GOVERNMENT COULD BE AT RISK. BUT IF THE REFERENDUM IS CARRIED BY A SUBSTANTIAL MAJORITY, REYNOLDS' POSITION WILL BE MUCH MORE SECURE. HE AND HIS COLLEAGUES WILL BE ABLE TO DEAL WITH ABORTION WITHOUT THE CONSTRAINT IMPOSED BY THE REFERENDUM, AND TO DEVOTE MORE ATTENTION TO OTHER MATTERS. THEY MAY BE ABLE TO BE MORE FLEXIBLE OVER NORTHERN IRELAND ISSUES. AND THE PRESSURES (AND TEMPTATIONS) TO GO FOR AN EARLY ELECTION AND A MAJORITY GOVERNMENT FREE OF THE CONSTRAINTS AND UNCERTAINTIES OF COALITION WILL INCREASE.

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