

GPS 450

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DESKBY 110900Z

FM WASHINGTON 110215Z APR 81

TO IMMEDIATE FCO

TELEGRAM NO 1177 OF 10 APRIL

AND TO NIO LONDON, NIO BELFAST, BIS NEW YORK

INFO IMMEDIATE DUBLIN

NORTHERN IRELAND: FERMANAGH, SOUTH TYRONE BY-ELECTION

1. THE ELECTION OF SANDS WILL OBVIOUSLY BE HEAVILY EXPLOITED HERE BY NORAID, IRISH NATIONAL CAUCUS AND PRO-IRA COMMENTATORS. BERNADETTE MCALISKEY IS FLYING TO NEW YORK THIS WEEKEND TO TAKE PART IN A TV PROGRAMME THERE ON MONDAY. THERE IS LITTLE OR NOTHING WHICH WE CAN DO TO COUNTER THIS EFFORT IN PRO-IRA CIRCLES.

2. A MORE SERIOUS DANGER IS THAT RESPONSIBLE MAINSTREAM OPINION, AND EDITORIAL COMMENT IN THE MAJOR PRINTED AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA, WILL BE ADVERSELY AFFECTED. THE ELECTION RESULT MAY BE SEEN AS DEMOLISHING OUR REPEATED ASSERTIONS THAT THE VAST MAJORITY OF NORTHERN IRISH PEOPLE, CATHOLIC AS WELL AS PROTESTANT, ABHOR TERRORISM; THAT THE IRA DOES NOT ENJOY ANY NUMERICALLY SIGNIFICANT POPULAR SUPPORT; AND THAT THEY HAVE CHOSEN VIOLENT RATHER THAN DEMOCRATIC METHODS FOR THIS REASON. THESE ASSERTIONS HAVE HITHERTO BEEN GENERALLY ACCEPTED, IN RESPONSIBLE POLITICAL AND MEDIA CIRCLES, EVEN BY THOSE CRITICAL OF THE PACE OR DIRECTION OF HMG'S POLICIES. A SHIFT AWAY FROM ACCEPTANCE OF THESE FUNDAMENTAL PREMISES WOULD CLEARLY BE VERY DAMAGING HERE.

3. SEEN FROM HERE, THEREFORE, IT IS ESSENTIAL TO EMPHASISE THAT THIS RESULT DOES NOT REFLECT THE POLITICAL REALITIES OF NORTHERN IRELAND AS A WHOLE. I RECOGNISE THE DIFFICULTY OF OFFERING ON-THE-RECORD COMMENT, AND INDEED I DO NOT PROPOSE THAT WE SHOULD DO SO. WE WILL NOT SEEK TO COMMENT, AND ON THE RECORD WE WILL DECLINE ANY ANALYSIS OR INTERPRETATION.

4. BUT THIS IS CERTAIN TO BE A MAJOR TOPIC OF MEDIA COVERAGE AND COMMENT IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE. AND I THINK IT EQUALLY CERTAIN THAT WE WILL BE PRESSED, IN THE FIRST INSTANCE BY EDITORIAL WRITERS, FOR SOME BACKGROUND COMMENT. A STRAIGHT NO COMMENT WOULD BE TAKEN AS TELLING ITS OWN STORY. IF, REPEAT IF, PRESSED BY RESPONSIBLE AND INFLUENTIAL COMMENTATORS, I PROPOSE TO MAKE THE FOLLOWING POINTS, OFF THE RECORD:

(1) THE RESULT, SADLY, REFLECTED AN ESSENTIALLY SECTARIAN VOTING PATTERN. WEST DELIVERED THE PROTESTANT VOTE. THERE WAS NO LEGITIMATE CATHOLIC CANDIDATE; IN HIS ABSENCE, CATHOLIC VOTERS OPTED FOR THE ONLY NON-PROTESTANT CANDIDATE.

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(II) THERE MAY ALSO HAVE BEEN A HUMANITARIAN DESIRE TO AVERT SANDS' DEATH ON HUNGER-STRIKE.

(III) IT IS REGRETTABLE THAT THE VOTERS WERE NOT GIVEN A MORE REPRESENTATIVE CHOICE, AS IN MAY 1979, AND REGRETTABLE THAT SECTARIAN CONSIDERATIONS IN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES PROVED PARAMOUNT. BUT IT IS NOT UNPRECEDENTED IN THIS PARTICULAR CONSTITUENCY, WHICH IS KNOWN FOR INTENSITY OF HARD-LINE REPUBLICANISM IN THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY: IN THE LATE 1950'S ANOTHER CONVICTED REPUBLICAN PRISONER WON AN ELECTION IN THIS SAME CONSTITUENCY (THOUGH UNDER THE THEN LAW HE WAS DEBARRED FROM TAKING HIS SEAT).

5. GRATEFUL FOR URGENT COMMENT, AND FOR CONFIRMATION AND ANY ADDITIONAL FACTS ON THE PRECEDENT IN 4(III) ABOVE.

HENDERSON

NORTHERN IRELAND	LIMITED
RID	PS/MR HURD
NAD	PS/MR RIDLEY
INFORMATION D	PS/MR BLAKER
WED	PS/PUS
MAED	SIR A ACLAND
NEWS D	CHIEF CLERK
SECURITY D	MR ADAMS
PUSD	MR BULLARD
PS	MR FERGUSSON
PS/LPS	LORD N G LENNOX
	MR BRAITHWAITE

ADDITIONAL DISTN.
NORTHERN IRELAND