

CAB/37/147/33

ue Reference: CAB/37/147

File Circulated May 16/16

[This Document is the Property of His Britannic Majesty's Government.]

Printed for the use of the Cabinet. May 1916. *177*CONFIDENTIAL

I CIRCULATE a memorandum stating, from first-hand information, the American point of view respecting Casement.

E. G.

On the 26th April Sir C. Spring-Rice received letters from Mr. John Quinn and Mr. Bourke Cochrane, of New York, two prominent Irish-American Nationalists, expressing the earnest hope that Sir R. Casement would not be executed. At Sir C. Spring-Rice's request I saw these gentlemen in New York before sailing.

Their view was as follows:—

The whole bulk of Irish opinion in the United States was against the rebellion. The Clan-na-Gael represented really only some 5,000 people. Only two things could change this feeling and enable the Clan-na-Gael and the "Gaelic American" to rouse sympathy for the rebellion amongst the floating mass of Irish-American malcontents—one would be a failure to suppress the rebellion immediately, the other would be the execution of Casement. The Clan-na-Gael already had their memorial leaflets for the "new Irish martyr" printed; they were already getting up meetings in honour of the "new Robert Emmet." If Casement were executed it would lend dignity to an absurd adventure which ought to have been smothered in ridicule.

The way out was to commit Casement to a lunatic asylum without trial. Everyone who had seen him in the United States at the beginning of the war believed him to be mad. Mr. Quinn, with whom he had been staying at that time, was convinced that he was not only mad but dying of tuberculosis. He had obviously made himself an intolerable nuisance in Germany, and Germany had obviously decided that a dead martyr was better than a live crank. That could be the only conceivable reason why Germany had sent him to Ireland; to execute him would simply be to fall into a German trap.

This conversation took place on the 28th April, before the extent of the rebellion was realised and before any executions had taken place. Since then, things have perhaps gone too far to make it easy simply to discredit the whole enterprise as absurd. But it must be remembered that it looks far more absurd and crazy to Americans than it looks to us, and that the Irish in the United States, and indeed America at large, are so convinced that Casement is mad that they will be unable to understand his execution except as a piece of vindictiveness. Opinions obtained on the 27th April from various leading politicians at Washington, such as the President's secretary, the Secretary of War, and the Counsellor of the State Department, made this quite clear. In fact, Americans think that the rebellion was so mad that it was only saved from complete ridicule by "British muddling," and they would look on Casement's execution as evidence, not so much of present strength, as of past incompetence. The "parliamentary" Nationalists in America—the Redmondites—who have always formed the backbone of Irish sentiment there, are now in a strong position as against the Clan-na-Gael, and could swing all but a negligible minority to their own view—that is to say, to the support of Mr. Redmond and to the view that Ireland's place is on the side of France and Belgium in the war. Casement's execution would, however, spoil this opportunity, and they would feel it to be foolish for that reason. They of course recognise that we could not show Casement any "mercy," but a criminal lunatic asylum is not "mercy," and they could not conceive why we should gratuitously place Casement in open court in a solemn trial for high treason, where he will have unlimited opportunities for patriotic posturing. As the position now stands, they would, I imagine, recommend the announcement at some moment between the

[601]

2

magisterial proceedings and the trial that Casement's mental state makes a postponement of the trial necessary and that he has been placed under medical care.
They will not, of course, embarrass us by any public appeal, but for that very reason they will think themselves entitled to have a private explanation of our intentions in advance in order that they may not get themselves in a false position as towards the Clan-na-Gael.

Foreign Office, May 13, 1916.

E. P.