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SUBJECT : REPUBLIC OF IRELAND: ELECTION PROSPECTS

SUMMARY

1. INCREASING SPECULATION THAT THE GOVERNMENT WILL CALL AN ELECTION BEFORE THE SUMMER. IF SO, RECENT POLLS SUGGEST THAT THE CURRENT COALITION HAS AN IMPROVED CHANCE OF BEING RETURNED TO OFFICE.

DETAIL

2. OUR POLITICAL SOURCES ARE TALKING UP THE POSSIBILITY THAT THE IRISH GOVERNMENT WILL CALL A GENERAL ELECTION BEFORE THE SUMMER - POSSIBLY BEFORE THE END OF MAY OR EVEN EARLIER - RATHER THAN DELAY UNTIL LATER IN THE YEAR. RUMOURS ABOUND IN LEINSTER HOUSE THAT THE TAOISEACH MAY ANNOUNCE A DATE WITHIN THE NEXT FEW DAYS.

3. RECENT OPINION POLLS INDICATE THAT SUPPORT FOR THE MAIN GOVERNMENT PARTIES (FINE GAEL AND LABOUR) IS ON AN UPWARD TREND. ALTHOUGH FIANNA FAIL, THE MAIN OPPOSITION PARTY IS HOLDING ITS POSITION, THE NATURE OF THE IRISH ELECTORAL SYSTEM - SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION - MEANS THAT THE PRESENT COALITION GOVERNMENT IS SEEN AS HAVING AN INCREASED CHANCE OF RETURNING TO OFFICE, HAVING BEEN SOMETHING OF A LONG SHOT FOR MUCH OF THE LAST TWO YEARS.

4. THE GOVERNMENT ALSO HOPES THAT THE MCCrackEN TRIBUNAL, WHICH IS INVESTIGATING PAYMENTS MADE BY BUSINESSMAN BEN DUNNE TO POLITICIANS, WILL FURTHER TARNISH FIANNA FAIL'S IMAGE. FURTHER REVELATIONS ARE EXPECTED IN THE COMING WEEKS. EVEN IF FORMER FIANNA FAIL TAOISEACH CHARLIE HAUGHEY IS NOT NAMED AS THE RECIPIENT OF 1 MILLION POUNDS IN THE EARLY 1990'S, THE CONTINUING MEDIA INTEREST IS LIKELY TO EMBARRASS THE PARTY.

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John 24/3

Prime Minister
Confirmation that the
Irish election is likely in
late May / early June. One
reason for going early is
that the economic
position may worsen soon,
with particular trouble
looming over
public sector pay.
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5. ECONOMIC ARGUMENTS FOR AN EARLY ELECTION MAY ALSO BE TELLING. THE BENEFITS OF THE JANUARY BUDGET WILL BE SEEN BY MAY. WHEREAS, BY THE AUTUMN, THE GOVERNMENT COULD BE EMBROILED IN A NUMBER OF DIFFICULTIES, THE PICTURE ON INFLATION, EMU AND PUBLIC SECTOR COULD BE FAR LESS POSITIVE (SEE MIFT FOR FURTHER DETAILS).

6. ALTHOUGH MINISTERS ARE STILL SAYING PUBLICLY THAT THEY ARE KEEPING THEIR OPTIONS OPEN, PLANNING IS NOW GOING AHEAD FOR AN ELECTION. THE GOVERNMENT CHIEF WHIP HAS INDICATED PRIVATELY THAT, WHILE NO DECISION HAS YET BEEN TAKEN, THE DECKS ARE BEING CLEARED FOR 5 JUNE. THE LABOUR PARTY, THE VITAL SWING ELEMENT FOR THE PRESENT (AND PERHAPS FUTURE) COALITION GOVERNMENT, HAVE BEEN BRIEFING THE PRESS TO EXPECT A DATE IN LATE MAY/EARLY JUNE. OTHERS, SUCH AS THE SPEAKER OF THE DAIL, HAVE BEEN PRIVATELY SPECULATING THAT THE ELECTION MIGHT COME EVEN SOONER THAN THAT, GIVEN THE EFFECT ELECTIONEERING IS ALREADY HAVING ON DAIL ATTENDANCES, AND THE QUALITY OF DEBATE (AND AMENDMENT OF) THE VAST AMOUNT OF GOVERNMENT LEGISLATION THAT IS BEING RUSHED THROUGH. MEANWHILE, FINE GAEL HAVE ALREADY APPOINTED A FULL-TIME CAMPAIGN DIRECTOR, SOMETHING THAT IN THE PAST THEY HAVE DELAYED DOING LONG UNTIL THE LATER STAGES OF AN ELECTION CAMPAIGN.

COMMENT

7. IT REMAINS THE CASE THAT THE TAOISEACH TOLD ME PERSONALLY A MONTH AGO THAT THE ONLY DECISION HE HAD TAKEN ABOUT THE GENERAL ELECTION WAS THAT IT WOULD NOT (NOT) TAKE PLACE BEFORE 3 JUNE (THE DATE ON WHICH ALL-PARTY TALKS RESUME IN BELFAST). BUT, HE CAN ALWAYS CHANGE HIS MIND, AND THE PRESSURES DESCRIBED ABOVE MAY BE IMPOSSIBLE TO WITHSTAND.

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