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10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

21 March 1986

Dear Jim,

Thank you for the letter which you and Dr. Paisley sent to me on 7 March.

At our meeting on 25 February you both made clear that you fully maintained your opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and that any subsequent talks would be without prejudice to that position. We agreed to reflect on the various suggestions that had been made and to meet again shortly.

Having now received your letter, I am glad to hear that it remains your purpose to create a framework within which dialogue can take place. For our part we certainly wish to enter into talks with you on any or all of the matters I mentioned when we met, including matters on which the Agreement has no bearing, such as improved arrangements for unionists to put forward views and proposals to Ministers and the handling of Northern Ireland business in Parliament. There is also the issue of the future of the Assembly and the proposal, to which I will return, for a round table Conference on devolution.

I made clear at our meeting that I recognised the strength of your feelings about the Anglo-Irish Agreement, but I must take issue with some of the interpretations placed on it in the resolutions enclosed with your letter. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) in its resolution, reaffirms its determination 'never to submit or consent to joint London - Dublin authority over Northern Ireland'. I can readily

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understand this position, indeed I share it. The Anglo-Irish Agreement does not provide for, create or envisage such joint authority. On the contrary the Agreement makes it clear that the Intergovernmental Conference has no executive authority and that the Irish Government's role is limited to putting forward views and proposals. It is expressly stated in the Agreement that there is no derogation from the sovereignty of the United Kingdom Government, which remains solely responsible for decisions in relation to the affairs of Northern Ireland. There is consequently no question of 'joint authority', nor does the Agreement in any way threaten the union: I should not have been a party to it if it did. On the contrary, the guarantee of successive United Kingdom Governments and Parliaments that the status of Northern Ireland cannot and will not be changed without the consent of a majority of the people in Northern Ireland, is explicitly recognised and accepted by the Government of the Republic.

The DUP resolution also talks about 'equality of citizenship within the United Kingdom' and the 'fundamental right to be governed in accordance with the principles, procedures and practises which obtain in the United Kingdom as a whole'. One of those principles is surely the acceptance of the sovereign authority of the United Kingdom Parliament: indeed this must be a corollary of your rejection, which I share, of any dilution of that authority. While I made absolutely clear to you that we are committed to, and will not suspend, the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which has been approved by such a significant Parliamentary majority, I told you when we met that we were ready to approach the working of the Agreement in a sensitive way.

You suggested that there should be a round table Conference with the constitutional parties in Northern Ireland to consider proposals for devolution. Mr. Hume has made it clear that the Social Democratic and Labour Party would be prepared to participate in immediate discussions on devolution without pre-conditions. I can confirm that the Government is ready to take part in such a Conference and to

discuss with you how best to set it up as quickly as possible. If, as a result, there were agreement upon proposals for devolved government, then subjects which thereafter became the responsibility of the devolved administration would no longer come within the scope of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. In that event, we should of course need to review the implications of any such proposals for the working of the Intergovernmental Conference, as its ambit would be significantly affected by the devolution of matters to democratic institutions in Northern Ireland.

You will, I am sure, share my view that the approach of constructive discussion on the matters covered above must be preferable to a repetition of the sort of events that took place in Northern Ireland on 3 March. The important thing now is that we should work together to spare Northern Ireland the consequences of a confrontation that could only damage all of its people. We believe that consultation and not confrontation must be the way to proceed. I do not think our fellow citizens throughout the United Kingdom will understand why, if that is what we all say we want to do, we do not proceed with it.

My office stands ready to discuss with yours dates for another meeting between us.

I am writing in similar terms to Dr. Paisley.

Yours
James
Molyneux

The Rt. Hon. James Molyneux, J.P., M.P.