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IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON.

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SECRET AND PERSONAL

Mr Noel Dorr
Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs

23 May 1988

Dear Secretary

1. I would like to offer a few reflections, from a London perspective, on present Anglo-Irish difficulties, together with a few thoughts on how best to move forward from the present position. It was written in some haste, but I hope that some of these thoughts, from the London angle, may be of value at the present time.

2. The nature of present difficulties

Mrs Thatcher's starting position on Ireland, in 1979-80, was that of her friends Airey Neave, Ian Gow and others: Northern Ireland is as British as Finchley; it is incomprehensible that any sane person in that part of the UK could wish to live outside it or take it out of the Kingdom; if they want to leave, then why don't they? etc. From 1983-85, however, she moved, in a radical way, over a number of fundamental thresholds, toward the Anglo-Irish Agreement. However, it took a great deal of co-ordinated skills and, here and there, of powerful chemistry, to move her that distance. I would suggest that she was just about brought over the line; that there is a real thread of truth running through the argument made by horrified friends such as Peter Utley, that she sat down between the shafts several times and had to be goaded forward toward the line by Howe, Armstrong and others: that if a really powerful Unionist voice had been there to counsel her - such as Hailsham - during the negotiation, then it would have failed but that Armstrong kept such voices out and effectively sealed her in, against her own instincts, with persuasive voices, Irish and British, urging her in only one direction.

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At all major stages, however, there was surely a consistency in Mrs Thatcher's strident approach to the process. She asserted fairly regularly her understanding of what it was all about: greatly improved security co-operation and the defeat of the IRA. At several sessions the principals really talked at each other rather than with each other, she repeating herself on these points, and the previous Taoiseach going along with this but asserting his own basic requirements and bottom line approach (movement in the justice area, Maryfield and so on). Each heard the other out, but in a process where she had to be brought forward, was her simplistic version of what it was all about ever brought up short and fundamentally contradicted? Rather, was she not allowed to feel that her part of the Agreement would produce the hard results she imagined, and that the Irish part (for us, delivery in the vital areas which were the only reason for Irish agreement to the Agreement, but which she hardly fully understood or appreciated) would complement the work toward those hard results.

I would suggest, therefore, that she has a fundamentally different view of the Agreement to what many observers think, including British observers; that she has always had this different view and is consistent in it; that the present Anglo-Irish process is bound to produce increasingly fundamental differences between her and the Taoiseach; that, unless she is made to understand the coherence of the Taoiseach's wider philosophy on Northern Ireland, including the assured place of the Agreement in that philosophy, we are heading for impasse in the Anglo-Irish political relationship - real breakdown; that the job of making her understand the matter in its more complex reality can only be done by the Taoiseach himself; that this job can be done, with a concerted effort; and that, if it is done, the Taoiseach could possibly bring Mrs Thatcher further down the road toward historic progress on the Northern Ireland problem as we could understand that term.

There is perhaps an Irish way of saying certain things which - leaving the substance of the remarks aside - affects British ears badly, causes a spontaneous allergic reaction; the obverse was seen, for example, in the way Mrs Thatcher's "out,out,out" comments caused such a reaction at national level in Ireland. She did not mean to cause that reaction; if anything, she found it incomprehensible. But each side has these allergic tendencies which are deep and historical in origin.

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If this is a fact, then, taking the Taoiseach's U.S. comments, what is the result? I would suggest that

- on the one hand, the Taoiseach would assert with vigour that his carefully-thought-out job of defeating Noraid, using a "body language" which his experience of judging American audiences led him to employ consciously for the purpose, was a major success; that the British should at the very least recognise this; and that any other British reaction is incomprehensible except at the level of British pigheadedness, naivety or basic unwillingness to accept his judgement in these matters;
- on the other hand, Mrs Thatcher does not comprehend the Taoiseach's purposes and was not alerted to what was going to happen. She heard the Taoiseach's comments out of the blue and, to her, they were packed with the sort of language which must cause this allergic reaction in her ("I cannot report any movement in the situation in Northern Ireland.....continuing violence and division there.....harrassment of civilians by the security forces..... persistence of injustice and discrimination and the lack of confidence in the administration of justice.....increasingly widespread recognition of the basic fact that a settlement which would achieve peace with justice must transcend the existing framework of Northern Ireland.....the killing of three Irish people in Gibraltar.....that it is the entity of Northern Ireland itself and its constitution that is the problem and that no solution is in fact possible within its confines").

On the Irish side, the term "solution" was of course never used in the context of the Anglo-Irish Agreement even when, in the early negotiating phase, there was a possibility of an Agreement that was far more wide-reaching. While the over-selling of the Agreement (perhaps an increasingly serious error) at the time by those involved in it may perhaps be understandable, it was never suggested that it was the single major panacea for the problem, quite simply because it was clearly no such thing. The consensus Irish view of it might have been that it was a framework for a holding operation within Northern Ireland, aimed at peace, stability and reconciliation, pending the development over time, throughout the island, of better relations and wider possibilities between the Unionists and the majority in the island.

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On the British side, we need to distinguish between the general interpretation of the Agreement below Mrs Thatcher and Mrs Thatcher's own interpretation. Below her (Ministers, Parliament, the public as a whole), there was a new consensus that the Irish as a whole were a fairly decent lot who dislike terrorism as much as the British, and would help to fight it; that the Unionists had no right to mistreat the minority and deserved the Agreement - their inability to comprehend the Agreement bore out their awfulness; that if as a result of it the violence faded from the television screens, and if it led to unity in Ireland at some point in the future, well and good.

For Mrs Thatcher, however, it was different. She had been gently brought forward, effectively lulled into an expectation that the level of security co-operation would be much more than it ever could have been; she believed that the Irish had signed up on terrorism and she was allowed to draw this conclusion. She thought that there would be a new era in which we would effectively seal the border and catch the terrorists on both sides, and the minority would settle down inside Northern Ireland. It would be a success in its own terms.

Commentators have suggested that Mrs Thatcher could see beyond the Agreement, would like to go down in the history books by reaching a solution to the Irish problem. I would suggest that this is an Irish version of Mrs Thatcher's aspiration: it assumes incorrectly that Mrs Thatcher sees constitutional movement in Ireland - unity or a form of federation - as essential to a solution. Rather, Mrs Thatcher may have seen the solution as flowing from the Agreement itself, whereby the minority settled down in the North - inside the UK - and ceased their support for the IRA which would be tackled resolutely by the two Governments. In a sense she got off the train too early, before any Irish or, indeed, sympathetically informed British observers would have said the journey was over and the destination reached. Thus, she may have thought she was in the history books - on Ireland as well as on other issues - and that the solution as she understood it would flow from the Agreement.

If so, it was of course naive but, if true, then at least it explains her consistency. It also explains her at first sight incredibly harsh reaction to the Taoiseach's U.S. comments (and, of course, his comments on various other events: Gibraltar, the Birmingham Six and so on). Quite simply,

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- she sees the Agreement as the jewel in the crown of the Anglo-Irish relationship. It has to be polished regularly: public comments and all actions on Ireland by both Governments should start with a ritual polishing of the Agreement;
- she believes that there is no life beyond the Agreement. The Taoiseach's wider philosophy is to her incomprehensible as it seems to go beyond the Agreement framework and to dismiss the principles which she believes underly the Agreement and which must inform all British and Irish comments and actions regarding Northern Ireland;
- she demands and expects and believes that Dublin and London are signed up to use whatever methods are necessary to systematically eradicate the IRA. This is the cornerstone: she goes along with the other elements of the Agreement in a vague way at the level of principle (the principle for her being the desirability of settling the minority down in Northern Ireland and drying up support for the IRA). She is not too keen on some measures which Dublin would insist are needed to do that. Three-judge courts were a case in point. However, we know that she was prepared to go along with Howe, Hurd and King on it, and only turned it down when Hailsham "swung the handbag" with Havers' support. She said "I cannot go against the law officers", and that was the end of it. Her increasing distaste for the Unionist politicians and perceptions of the loyalists perhaps made it easier to go along in principle with the Dublin agenda. But there is no room in her mind, and in the world of the Agreement, for the rhetoric employed by the Taoiseach; no room for the rhetoric of ambivalence, as she would see it, on terrorism: the Taoiseach's reactions on the Birmingham Six, Stalker/Sampson and Gibraltar fall slap into this category; no room for rhetoric that looks beyond the Agreement toward solutions to Northern Ireland: for her the solution lives in the Agreement; no room at all for arguments that the Agreement does not work: she believes that she has paid a high price for the Agreement but has stuck to it without flinching, and she demands the same from Dublin.

It may be fair to summarise the present perceptions by the Taoiseach and Mrs Thatcher, each of the other, along the following lines:

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- The Taoiseach has been prepared to go along with the Agreement as a binding commitment and insofar as it might help the minority and all the people of the North. He has tried to implement it fully. He has demonstrated an unprecedented level of security co-operation with the British. She is not implementing the Agreement. Her Government has demonstrated extraordinary insensitivity on issue after issue, toward his particular political position and the real political and public pressures he has had to sustain. She has to bring more to the Agreement process and relationship. She has nothing to complain legitimately about. He has explained his views to her Ambassador. Only the IRA will benefit from recent events. She is the unreasonable party.

- Mrs Thatcher is frustrated by a tangled, incomprehensible rhetoric coming from Dublin on issues which in reality are extremely simple, which are indeed the subject of an Agreement binding on the Taoiseach. Why does he not condemn terrorism and support the Agreement unequivocally in every public utterance? Why does he speak in incomprehensible terms about Gibraltar, the Birmingham Six, Stalker/Sampson etc.? We are supposed to be at one, together, on all these things. Instead of full support under the Agreement for the fight against terrorism, at every turn in that fight which goes on without real support from Dublin, the Taoiseach's statements support the terrorists. Only the IRA will benefit from recent events. It was necessary to put the extent of her feelings on paper, both to get across those feelings directly and unequivocally, and to challenge the Taoiseach to respond. That response had better clear all ambivalences out of the way. The Anglo-Irish relationship hinges on that response. Everything else awaits it.

If there is truth in this summary, then it seems clear that the Taoiseach and Mrs Thatcher are at loggerheads. Progress is not possible, and further difficulties are inevitable, unless and until Mrs Thatcher is made to understand the coherence of the Taoiseach's philosophy. But, we are dealing with a Prime Minister who is becoming more metallic, more implacable, more certain in her convictions, more dismissive of any critical or querulous voices, more autonomous, more monolithic. She is, of course, not only this way vis-a-vis Dublin, but vis-a-vis practically everyone she does business with. Wise counsellors are falling away around her (Whitelaw, Howe) as she feels less and less need to hear advice and counsel. Her most recent statements about

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her vision of Britain are not short of being messianic. She is, therefore, a difficult figure to do business with.

Before Mrs Thatcher cut across the Anglo-Irish political landscape with her letter, British and Irish Ministers and officials, reviewing that landscape, might have concluded that

- there have been lessons learned from some very difficult incidents over past months;
- the Anglo-Irish political process may just benefit from the lessons learned;
- the Agreement may in fact have hardened in the blaze of recent events which tested its durability;
- there is a shared agenda of serious work to be done in the Conference which should now settle down to regular business;
- sensitivity should be brought on both sides to difficult issues in future.

Mrs Thatcher has cut across any such shared general feeling about where we all are now. It is understood (from Tim George in London) that in her view the very relationship hinges on what reply comes from the Taoiseach. This can only mean, in round terms, that she requires reassurances from the Taoiseach on the various points raised, and she can only understand such reassurances - if they were forthcoming - in terms of what she understands by the Agreement and commitments under it. If points made above have validity, then genuine reassurances and elaborations can only work if she is got to understand that her present views and judgements are wrong because they are too simplistic, and to understand - if she can be got to listen - the wider, coherent philosophy which is fundamental to the Taoiseach's whole approach. If she listened, she could come to understand, too, where the Agreement is in the overall scenario, together with the fact that it is secure.

Also, if points made above have validity, no letter could in itself reassure Mrs Thatcher or bring her to a satisfactory level of understanding of the Taoiseach's philosophy. What would achieve this?

3. A possible way forward

If the foregoing broad conclusions have validity then, it is suggested, only the Taoiseach himself can effectively "take on" Mrs Thatcher at a personal level and make her listen to his philosophy, make her shift her ground. It would not be easy, and the outcome is not assured. It is not easy, however, to see any other way forward.

If the Taoiseach were to take this approach, and if he succeeded, he would have - and would be seen to have - brought Mrs Thatcher into a real dialogue which he could then lead forward. If he took this approach, and if he failed (if, say, despite his patient and reasoned efforts, she refused to budge), he would have to be seen by British Ministers and observers to have done everything that a reasonable man could do. This could of course be got across widely at Westminster and, as necessary, in the media. Thus, in the event that push may come to shove in this matter, there may be a strong strategic argument for the Taoiseach now seizing the moral high ground and making every effort to make her see sense.

As to procedure, it might be considered whether a written reply to Mrs Thatcher should be kept quite short, confined to some strong general points and asserting the importance of Mrs Thatcher having an opportunity to understand better the realities underlying the Taoiseach's whole approach; a meeting, perhaps in London en route to or from Hanover, could be proposed, as could a meeting in Hanover which they could agree to have before or after the Summit. It is suggested that a meeting in London en route to or from Hanover could be got over, in terms of media and public presentation, more easily than a special Dublin-London-Dublin journey.

It is suggested that a letter to Mrs Thatcher could perhaps include some of the points in the attached draft.

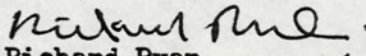
4. Footnote

As mentioned above, these observations and suggestions were assembled in haste. I have run on at some length, for which I apologise. However, there are,

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hopefully, some elements which, from a specific London perspective, may be of some value.

Yours sincerely


Richard Ryan
Minister-Counsellor