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Title: Copy letter from Donal O’Sullivan, Ambassador of Ireland to Great Britain, to HJ McCann, Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs, reporting a meeting with Merlyn Rees, Shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, regarding political developments in Northern Ireland and the Labour Party position on the situation there.

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17 Grosvenor Place
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October 18th 1972

Personal and Confidential

Dear Secretary

I had a long conversation over lunch on Monday last with Mr. Merlyn Rees, M.P. His feeling at this stage on the North is one of very considerable pessimism. The Protestant backlash has arrived. He was in Belfast last week and came away deeply depressed as a result of talks he had with people like [REDACTED] whose determination to resort to violence was quite frightening.

The main message which Mr. Rees conveyed to me repeatedly during our talk was that Mr. Whitelaw is now in real difficulty and that it would be most helpful if we would come to his rescue in any way we can. Mr. Whitelaw's problem derives from a number of considerations. He may find it very difficult indeed to deal effectively with the violence now coming from the majority side. The local elections look as though they might well be a flop and they may have to be postponed. This would be a serious loss of face to the Government here. Mr. Whitelaw is also in difficulty about the Plebiscite. There is a feeling now that it too may have to be postponed and that provision for it may be included in the overall package. Finally, it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the support which Mr. Powell is gathering. He had sizeable support at the Blackpool Conference and this gives an important boost to hardliners on the Tory backbenches. Faced with all these problems, Mr. Whitelaw could well grow tired of the job and could conceivably throw in the sponge. There is nobody on the Tory side

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who could do the Northern job as well as Mr. Whitelaw.

Mr. Rees was quite specific in his suggestions as to the ways in which we could ease the situation for Mr. Whitelaw. The majority in the North must be continually reassured that there can be no question of their being coerced into joining a united Ireland. It would be most helpful if the Taoiseach could seize on every opportunity open to him to reiterate this point in the clearest terms. In our references to the handling of the Northern situation we should, above all, avoid harsh criticism and an attitude of aggressiveness. It is up to us now to play it cool and to make clear our readiness to participate constructively in any moves designed to bring about a reasonable solution.

We could also help by appealing publicly to the minority in the North to give their full support to the local elections. I said to Mr. Rees that a public pronouncement on this by the Taoiseach, or by one of our Ministers, might only exacerbate the feelings of the majority. What we could do privately in talks with the SDLP and others would be another matter. Mr. Rees said he appreciated the point. He went on to say that an early move by us in relation to Article 44 of the Constitution might be worthwhile in that it would indicate to the majority a real disposition on our part to accommodate ourselves to their views.

Harold Wilson is convinced that it is a matter of urgency to involve Dublin openly in the finding of a settlement of the Northern problem. If we take steps now to help Mr. Whitelaw out in any way we can, this would, in Mr. Wilson's view, make our early involvement in consultations a good deal easier. What Mr. Wilson and Mr. Rees are hoping is that it might be possible to persuade the Government here

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to announce at the time of issue of the Green Paper that Dublin was being brought into the further discussions. In reply to a question by me, Mr. Rees said that he had not made up his mind as yet as to whether discussion with us should be at Government level or with the political parties in Dublin. Ideally talks with the parties would be a better arrangement if, in advance, they could agree to a unified approach. He assured me repeatedly that there is a growing determination on the Labour side to get Dublin involved as soon as possible.

Mr. Rees professed not to know at first hand the likely contents of the Green Paper. It must, in his view, contain a good deal more than a summary of, and comments on, the various proposals which have been put forward. Because of the need ~~of~~ ^{to} ~~getting~~ down quickly to the practicalities of the situation the Green Paper should contain suggestions as to possible solutions "and most people could now guess the shape of these suggestions". A Council of Ireland must be an essential feature of any solution. It should, according to Mr. Rees, be concerned mainly, if not solely, with economic and social problems of mutual concern especially in the context of the EEC. I said that, given the situation now reached and particularly the proposals put forward by the SDLP, I doubted if this would be enough. Mr. Rees sees little possibility of a significant advance by the Government here in the matter of a statement of intent on the Constitutional issue. I threw out the idea to him that the functions of the Council would need to be fairly clearly defined in order to ensure that the Council, when it came into existence, would prove to be more than a general talking shop. It seemed to me personally, even though I had no official advice as to our

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thinking, that the functions of the Council would need to be fairly clearly defined. The periodicity of its meetings and the form of representation at them would need to be spelt out. It was, I believed, essential too that there should be, in the terms of reference of the Council, at least general provision for discussion by it of matters outside the scope of the economic and social spheres. Mr. Rees told me that he could personally accept this view and that he would take an early opportunity to convey my remarks to Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Rees then went on to tell me that in his recent talks with representatives both of the majority and the minority in the North, he was greatly struck by the deep concern expressed to him about the economic disadvantages for them if they were to find themselves in a united Ireland. Their concern arises mainly in the fields of social services and education. As an example, he said that Austin Curry had told him that he himself could not agree to a united Ireland until such time as he was sure that the South would be in a position to provide in its area the same free educational facilities that exist in the North.

Mr. Rees talked at some length about the difficulties which the Government here is faced with over the whole area of its policy. He could, in the circumstances, see a Labour Government being returned in the next election. With that possibility in mind, the Labour Party is most anxious to see a solution of the Northern problem reached before it could become an election issue. If Labour is returned Mr. Wilson is almost certain to take responsibility for Northern Ireland affairs completely out of the hands of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Home Office. The Secretary of

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State for Northern Ireland Affairs would, in the circumstances, take over all the Westminster responsibilities. In Mr. Wilson's view the Home Office and, more especially, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office "are the dead hands ^{on} of the North". Mr. Wilson would, almost certainly, want too to change the type of diplomatic representation in Dublin. He would see great merit in assigning to Dublin an important political figure rather than a career diplomat as this should help considerably in securing movement in the direction of reunification.

Mr. Rees also told me in the course of conversation that, according to his information, Mr. Heath "is mad" about the outcome of Strasbourg. The Prime Minister has obviously found the adjudication very embarrassing and would, apparently, be keen to see an amicable understanding reached. I said I was, as yet, not fully informed on the details of the Strasbourg case.

Finally, Mr. Rees told me that he will be travelling to Dublin on the 31st October to address a meeting that evening in Trinity College. He hopes to arrive in Dublin in the forenoon of the 31st and to return to London the following day.

Mr. Rees said he would greatly welcome the opportunity for an exchange of views with the Taoiseach and asked if I could make enquiries as to the possibility of a meeting between them. I told him that I would take the matter up and let him know the result. If the Taoiseach should find it possible to see him, Mr. Rees would like to be able to say to the press, after the talk, that the Taoiseach had reiterated to him the view he had often expressed that there could be no question of coercing the majority in the North into a united Ireland. I have sent a teleprinter to Mr. McDonagh on this question

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of a possible meeting by Mr. Rees with the Taoiseach.

I am now arranging an early luncheon meeting with Mr. Wilson
as I feel that ^atalk with him at this stage may be useful.

Yours sincerely

DONAL O'SULLIVAN

Ambassador

H J McCann Esq
Secretary
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Dublin