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Taoiseach's Meeting with British Prime MinisterPreliminary Draft Steering Note

This note attempts to describe briefly the principal elements in Anglo-Irish relations at this juncture, with a view to determining (i) what, if any, room for manoeuvre our Government has and (ii) how best the Taoiseach might use that in his approach to Mrs. Thatcher.

Northern Ireland

The principal problem is the widespread and, we suspect, growing alienation on the nationalist side. By "alienation" is meant a refusal of British or Unionist authority to a degree which threatens or constitutes instability. The principal manifestation of this alienation was the 43% of nationalist votes cast for Provisional Sinn Féin in the recent Westminster elections.

In the absence of counteravailing events, the rising support for Sinn Féin will continue, and, it is widely expected, overtake support for the SDLP within two years. This is likely to be demonstrated in the local elections of 1985.

The present level of support for Sinn Féin has created difficulties for the credible presentation of a moderate Dublin policy both in Ireland (particularly among more fervent nationalists) and abroad, e.g. in the U.S. and Britain.

The emergence of Sinn Féin as the predominant nationalist political voice within two years would increase those difficulties qualitatively and create new and more daunting problems for our Government: for example, would we be forced to "deal" with Sinn Féin? And what would be the effects of such a development on the stability of our own State?

A key short-term objection in the interest of the stability of the island North and South, would therefore seem to be: to address and reverse the tide of nationalist alienation.

On the Unionist side, intransigence has been correspondingly reinforced. It is feared both by the Northern Ireland Office and ourselves that the leadership of the revived Official Unionist Party, which is already strongly so inclined, could easily be brought to declare integration within the United Kingdom to be its objective. A momentum for such a course could gather by the Summer of next year in circumstances of continuing impasse and would probably, in such circumstances, attract a body of support from Tories at Westminster, at first from a minority but soon unless some alternative seemed credible, from growing numbers. Such a scenario is also dangerous: it would create a tense stand-off between nationalists and unionists in Ireland and probably, if it seemed likely to gain Governmental support in Britain, between Dublin and London.

It follows that another key objective must be: to create circumstances which would inhibit a momentum towards integration on the part of Unionist and Tory politicians.

London

Mrs. Thatcher remains the decisive figure. Our information is that the Northern Ireland issue does not figure among her priorities which are now being fixed for this Parliament. We are told that she has a conviction, reinforced in recent years, that every effort of Government to resolve the crisis, only made it worse. By political preference a Unionist, she is more susceptible to influence from Powell and the "integrationist" Tories than the more moderate Prior. Another difficulty, in terms of nationalist desiderata, is that Mrs. Thatcher is extremely unlikely to go back on her word to the Unionists: that does not necessarily mean that she will not change the perceived reality of her commitment, if so persuaded.

A key objective vis-a-vis Mrs. Thatcher must be firstly to secure her interest quickly in action on the Northern Ireland crisis. In identifying appropriate action efforts should be made to find a device whereby she would not be required to do violence to her word.

Mr. Prior admits the alienation and instability problems. While committed to effort towards an initiative next year, he is not inclined to look beyond power-sharing. We find it difficult to believe that Unionists of either the O.U.P. or the D.U.P. would accept power-sharing. We fear, moreover, that power-sharing of itself (if it could be arranged) would not affect the problem of nationalist alienation which requires a tangible Irish element in the structure of public authority in Northern Ireland. Our objective in talks with Mr. Prior has been to try to persuade him of the urgent need for British as well as Irish reasons of stability for a strong Irish dimension in any arrangements for Northern Ireland.

Room for Manoeuvre

In assessing this, a few positive elements should be recalled:

- we are told that Mrs. Thatcher trusts the Taoiseach;
- the Anglo-Irish framework (Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council etc.) is intact: it must be said that experience hitherto has not demonstrated the capacity of this structure to address the problem in any other than peripheral terms (granted this was the theory of its conception); it is not easy to see how, without a radical departure, it could be used to have a tangible effect on the political circumstances of Northern Ireland;
- the ongoing New Ireland Forum, which may succeed in bringing realism into the nationalist debate and into nationalist expectations: the argument has sometimes been put to the British side in recent months that they should look more to the assessment of the Northern Ireland problem of the Forum than to its proposals for useful common ground; it must be added that on the British side, there will almost certainly be a strong unwillingness to be presented by a fait accompli by the Forum, a situation which would eliminate room for manoeuvre so far as they are concerned and correspondingly increase the pressure (Unionist especially) on them to reject a particular proposal;

- the U.S. dimension: Reagan recently raised the issue with Mrs. Thatcher as a result of an initiative by Speaker O'Neill taken at our request: U.S. pressure (despite the Grenada crisis) probably remains the only decisive leverage on this issue with Mrs. Thatcher;
- the fact that both leaders probably each has a term of four years ahead.

On the negative side, our Government must face the following difficult dilemma:

- assume, as seems prudent, that Mrs. Thatcher will be in Government for much of the next five years;
- assume that she will not yield on the formal constitutional issue in that time;

The dilemma then is: do we or do we not insist on maintaining all our nationalist cards face up on the table during that time? If so, the inescapable consequence seems to be that we must await a change of political leadership in Britain before a "breakthrough" is conceivable. That implies that we contemplate the end of the SDLP as the last remaining bulwork against Sinn Féin control of nationalism in Northern Ireland quite early on within that period, with all that that implies. Aside altogether from this very difficult issue, another difficult question must be asked: what real evidence is there that another British Administration in such circumstances in four or five years time would be more satisfactory from our point of view?

- We have already in recent weeks seen how Labour, as exemplified by Soley and Flannery, handle their relations in Northern Ireland i.e. principally with Adams and Morrison. Otherwise one could foresee Labour in Government dealing as they did earlier under Rees and Mason - after a similar approach from Wilson when in Opposition to the IRA - absolutely on Unionist terms.

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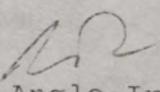
- There is no evidence that either the SDP or the Liberals have the capacity or the will to face the uncongenial (from a London viewpoint) aspect of "choosing" alternatively in Northern Ireland. It is difficult again to escape the unpleasant conclusion that they would weakly refuse to "bite the bullet".

Approach to Mrs. Thatcher

Assuming that we decide on a course other than confrontation, the approach might be:

- to try to persuade Mrs. Thatcher of the dangers to both countries arising from alienation and of the need for early action to reverse alienation; some progress has already been made in this area;
- to persuade her of the possible benefits to her position of a relatively positive outcome of the Forum; this would involve a lowering of expectations to a more realistic level on our side; the argument might again be considered that the assessment by the Forum of various problems, particularly the problems of Unionism, might in its acknowledgements (cf. the Forum document: the fundamental questions) be conciliatory and progressive, perhaps more so than the proposals which may emerge.

We have been told that in dealing with Mrs. Thatcher it is advisable to be concrete rather than theoretical. It is advisable that our approach be outlined in terms of concrete proposals for action which might be contemplated next year.


Anglo-Irish Division

26 October, 1983