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Text of letter to the Prime Minister, The Rt Hon Mrs Margaret Thatcher MP
from An Taoiseach, Dr Garret FitzGerald TD

24 February 1986

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP FRS
Prime Minister
No 10 Downing Street
London SW1

Dear Margaret

1. I have been reflecting on the difficulties which you face at your meeting with the Unionists tomorrow and thought it might be helpful to let you have some facts and figures on the issues which are causing concern. For security reasons, I would ask you not to divulge the figures in public but to speak in magnitudes and proportions.
2. You referred to difficulties created by speeches and interviews on the Anglo-Irish Agreement by Ministers here. I have now had an opportunity of reviewing the material and cannot identify problems of the type mentioned by you. Indeed Peter Barry and I have, in a number of speeches and interviews, gone out of our way to take a line as helpful as possible to the Unionists. I refer you in particular to Peter Barry's speeches of 18 November 1985 and 23 January 1986 and my own interview with Downtown Radio on 10 February 1986. If however, there are specific speeches or interviews which have created problems, please let me know so that I can examine them in detail. You know that in our working of the Conference we are as anxious as anybody to ensure that nothing said or done there contravenes the Agreement or could lead to its being unjustifiably attacked by either community.
3. You spoke at our meeting about the level of security on the border. There can be no doubt about our commitment to our success in combatting terrorism. Before the current troubles began in 1969, we had 800 Gardai in the border divisions. Now we have 1800. In 1969 we had no troops permanently stationed in border areas. Now we have 1500 soldiers in 11 military posts along the border. Soldiers relieve Gardai on escort, checkpoint and other security duties. This fourfold increase in numbers, therefore, represents a massive increase in total security along the border on our side.
4. In the Border Divisions, Detective Branch strength has increased from 26 in 1969 to 117 last September, 197 today, and at least 60 more in the near future as a result of a recent decision. This will represent at least a tenfold increase over the period. The number of uniformed police has also been increased recently, as has the volume of overtime, substantially.

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5. You will therefore understand how disappointed I was to find that you were under the impression that there are only about 15 members of our Gardai engaged on surveillance-type work and that, generally, intelligence-gathering on our side was not effective. Our Gardai generally - including most of the Detective Branch in civilian clothes - work openly in the community. Every member in the Border region, especially every Detective, collects intelligence about paramilitary activity. The information is centralised and collated. This is by far the most effective approach on our side and, while there is a place for intensive surveillance, the circumstances in which it ought to be employed are very limited in our conditions, given the more positive attitude to the Gardai amongst our community.

6. I have learned since our meeting that, having reviewed certain problems in the light of earlier discussions with the RUC, the Gardai last week indicated to the RUC that there are certain problems that they think can best be approached by surveillance work and they have invited RUC views on them. The Gardai are also pursuing the question of a further increase in their commitment to intelligence work, both independently and in discussion with the RUC. Moreover, four additional Inspectors are being appointed with the specific duty of improving intelligence liaison with the RUC.

7. Overall, my clear impression is that the increase in recent times in meetings between the Gardai and the RUC has very definitely contributed to a significant improvement in the area of border co-operation.

8. You complained about the SDLP's apparent unwillingness to talk to Unionists. John Hume has, since we met, publicly repeated his position in the most clear and unambiguous terms - no pre-conditions of any kind - to which as you will be aware considerable publicity has been given in our papers. Our Government's position is equally unambiguous; we fully and publicly support your Government's declared policy on devolution on the basis of widespread acceptance throughout the community. And, a point which is of particular interest to Unionists: to the extent that functions are devolved they cease to be within the ambit of the Conference.

9. A great deal of what Unionists are saying about the Agreement is simply false. The real danger is that, in the process, they will succeed in their attempts to obscure the purpose of the Agreement, namely to create an environment in Northern Ireland where the Nationalists can identify with the system of Government and so make life there and in this island better for everyone.

10. As Tom King said to me on Wednesday, the cruellest thing we could now do to the Unionists is to abandon the Agreement. We must implement it exactly as has been agreed and in doing so provide the only basis for peace and stability in Northern Ireland and for the best possible relationships between the peoples of the two islands.

Yours sincerely

Michael O'Leary