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Meeting between the Taoiseach and the
Presbyterian Church of Ireland,
3 February 1986

1. The Taoiseach hosted a lunch on 3 February for a delegation from the Presbyterian Church which comprised the following:
 - Rev. Robert Dickinson, Moderator;
 - Rev. Dr Tom Simpson, General Secretary and Clerk of the Assembly;
 - Rev. Harold Allen, Minister (Ballyclare);
 - Rev. Dr William McDowell, Minister (Sandymount).

Mr. Dermot Nally, Secretary to the Government, and the undersigned were also present. As note-taking was not possible, the following is an account from memory of the principal points made on either side.

2. Following some introductory remarks on the Conference, the Taoiseach explained the SDLP's attitude towards (a) devolution and (b) the RUC. In regard to the former, he recalled that John Hume had stated his party's views in explicit terms in the House of Commons on 26 November. Hume's commitment to seeking devolution was not in doubt. (Dickinson intervened to say that it was a pity that he had not made this clear in a recent television interview). The notion that the SDLP would sit back and allow the Conference to substitute for it was completely wrong. The Irish Government, furthermore, strongly supported devolution. Timing, however, was a problem. The SDLP would have to pick a moment for its formal offer of talks which would ensure a positive response to this offer, as any rebuff would be very damaging. It might not be a good idea for the party to make a public statement in the matter; private contacts might be more useful. In regard to the RUC, the SDLP had indicated publicly its support for the security forces in the

impartial discharge of their duties. To invite Catholics to join the RUC, however, was another matter, as such an invitation could conceivably have fatal consequences for those who accepted and no SDLP man would be prepared to accept this responsibility. Timing was again a problem. Despite the clear shift in support from Sinn Fein to the SDLP in the recent elections, the Agreement had, in fact, produced no major changes on the ground as yet in relation to the RUC. The British Government was dragging its feet in relation to a number of outstanding matters. First, the Code of Conduct had been delayed for no apparent reason. Secondly, the Stalker Report had been on the Chief Constable's desk for the past six months. While the British Government could perhaps argue that technically they had not yet seen the report, the probability was that they did not want to see it. This report must be published and the necessary action taken. Thirdly, the Conference had agreed at its first meeting that UDR patrols should henceforth be accompanied by the RUC. While statistics regarding the implementation of this policy had been promised, reports on the ground suggested that there was not much evidence of it so far.

3. Allen asked why there seemed to be a delay in regard to accession to the Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism. The Taoiseach explained that, in accordance with the Government's normal practice, legislation had to be prepared and enacted before signature could take place. This was a very complex matter and would take a long time. However, he was endeavouring to establish whether it would be possible, in a departure from previous practice, to sign first and legislate afterwards. He had no doubt that there would be advice from the Attorney General to the effect that this would be imprudent in view of the possibility of a constitutional challenge in the Courts. Nevertheless, he wished to sign at the earliest opportunity in order to demonstrate the Government's political will to go ahead on this.

4. Dickinson commented that the public indication that the Minister for Foreign Affairs would be raising the UDR shooting of two men near Cookstown in the Conference had been quite unhelpful. The Taoiseach replied by saying that this was, after all, what the Agreement was all about. This kind of incident had to be prevented in future if relations between the minority and the security forces were to improve. In this particular instance, the response from the British side had been extremely prompt - indeed, he could not remember any past occasion when the response had come so quickly. Within 18 hours, action had been taken: the UDR men concerned were told that they would not be required for operational duties until the investigation was over. This action did not, of course, prejudge in any way the outcome of the investigation. However, the speed with which the matter was tackled undoubtedly prevented the incident from being exploited to the advantage of subversives. Simpson commented later in the discussion that Unionists, being for the most part decent law-abiding citizens, would wish their security forces to be irreproachable and would have been quite upset by this incident. The Taoiseach indicated that, of course, the UDR was not without its redeeming features: he cited the case of the UDR commander in Coalisland who automatically fines his soldiers £100 for any misdemeanour. For most nationalists, however, the UDR was a hostile sectarian force which inspired no confidence. He mentioned in this connection the anecdote related to him recently by a Southern Church of Ireland Bishop about having been subjected to unpleasant treatment at the hands of a UDR patrol who believed that he was a Catholic priest.

5. The Taoiseach addressed in general terms the background of divided allegiances in Northern Ireland against which the Agreement had to be seen. Some 600,000 people in the North regarded themselves as Irish while some 900,000 saw themselves as British. To deal with the problems posed by these separate loyalties, the approach of involving the Irish Government in the affairs of Northern Ireland, even in

a subordinate role, seemed to be one which might help. The advantage of the Agreement was that, on the one hand, it gave Unionists the security of knowing that their position could not, and will not, be altered without the consent of a majority in Northern Ireland. On the other hand, however, it gave nationalists certain assurances. One purpose of the Agreement, as far as nationalists were concerned, was to engender a transfer of support from Sinn Fein to the SDLP, i.e. to bind nationalists more closely into the government of Northern Ireland. The shift had been apparent in the recent by-elections, not merely in Newry-Armagh but also in Mid-Ulster and Fermanagh-South Tyrone, constituencies where tactical, 'tribal' voting would ordinarily have put Sinn Fein well ahead. Dickinson contended that, even if this shift in minority opinion were achieved, relations between the minority and the majority were not improved by the Agreement. The rights of the majority community, who did not want the Agreement, had not been respected. The Taoiseach subsequently suggested that, to be properly British, Unionists would have to respect a majority decision reached by the Parliament of the United Kingdom. Any other response would mean pushing Northern Ireland in the direction of independence. Dickinson replied that Unionists accepted the fact of the Agreement. They accepted that it was now in existence. However, they also had, in his view, the right to register dissent from it, the right to say that "we don't like it and we want to abolish it". Allen challenged the Taoiseach's argument about the will of Parliament, recalling that it had been Westminster which had abolished the Stormont Parliament and suggesting that many of Northern Ireland's problems stemmed from that decision. This led into a discussion of the background to this decision, in the course of which the Taoiseach recalled the British Government's determination, expressed notably in the last 36 hours of the Sunningdale Conference, not to devolve responsibility for security. In a later intervention, Dickinson wondered why Irish people living in Britain, the US and elsewhere accepted to be governed by the sovereign Government in each case but would not accept this in

Northern Ireland. The Taoiseach explained that, in contrast to other societies in which Irishmen had been able to play their full part in political life (he cited Callaghan in the UK, Reagan, the Kennedys and O'Neill in the US), the political, social and other rights of the nationalist minority in Northern Ireland had been systematically denied over a period of decades.

6. Simpson made a number of points during the discussion. First, he congratulated the Government on the recent arms finds. Secondly, he welcomed the shift from Sinn Fein to the SDLP which the elections had manifested. Thirdly, he argued that "ordinary, decent, moderate unionists with a small u" must be given a chance to have their voices heard. Fourthly, he considered that John Hume's speech at the BIA conference in Oxford had been "hard-line" and unhelpful. Fifthly, he sensed a dampening of enthusiasm on the part of the British Government in regard to the Agreement. (On the latter point, Mr. Nally responded by saying that this was not our impression; rather, the message we were getting was that people in Northern Ireland want the Agreement to work).

7. There was some discussion of current Unionist strategy. The Taoiseach noted that the half-million Unionist votes against the Agreement predicted by Molyneaux had not materialised after all. Simpson commented that the Unionist parties had no strategy at present. They had issued no manifesto for the campaign and had fought the latter merely on the basis of saying "No". This, however, was not sufficient. Dickinson rather pointedly noted efforts by Robinson to set the record straight following his variously interpreted radio interview of the previous day. In contrast to McCusker's proposal for a tripartite conference, Robinson envisaged quite separate arrangements for Dublin's involvement. The Taoiseach presumed that both Robinson's proposal and McCusker's proposal (which, by introducing a tripartite conference to replace the present bipartite arrangement, pointed once again to McCusker's predilection

for the independence option) were designed to meet expectations at Westminster that the Unionists would now adopt a more constructive tone. He expected that, in the aftermath of the elections, divergences both between the OUP and the DUP and within each party (i.e. between those who support violence and those who do not) would become more apparent. McDowell hoped that some arrangements could be made to involve the Unionist parties in the workings of the conference.

8. In conclusion, the delegation expressed appreciation to the Taoiseach for his goodwill and hospitality and for the fact that his "door was always open" to them.

David Donoghue

David Donoghue

7 February 1986.

c.c. Taoiseach.
Minister.
Secretary.
Mr. Nally.
Mr. Lillis.
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