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SECRET

17 February, 1987



Mr. Eamonn O Tuathail,  
Assistant Secretary,  
Anglo-Irish Division,  
Department of Foreign Affairs.

cc Taoiseach  
Tánaiste  
Secretary  
Mr. Nally  
A-I Section  
Amb. London

Dear Eamonn,

The attached letter to Tom King is self-explanatory and is based on the Taoiseach's reading of a note which I sent to you on my last meeting with Tom King. I have sent the letter to Mr. King today.

There is a meeting in London on Thursday of all N.I.O. Ministers to make a decision on publication of the consultative document.

Yours sincerely,

*Michael*

M. J. Lillis  
Joint Secretary

PERSONAL & CONFIDENTIAL

17 February, 1987

The Rt. Hon. Tom King M.P.,  
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

*Dear Secretary of State*

When we met in London last week, you were kind enough to ask me for a personal reaction to an initiative you are considering taking arising from the problems caused by Provisional Sinn Fein in the Councils in Northern Ireland. You asked me not to treat this matter formally; I have been careful to handle it according to your wishes.

I have, however, had a number of quite informal exchanges with Mark Elliott on the matter in the course of which I supplemented the point of immediate concern that I outlined to you as my first reaction, i.e. the problems arising from electoral timing considerations in the South.

As the ideas you are considering seemed to me to have considerable political implications, I had hoped to mention them informally to Mr. Barry. Unfortunately, for reasons that you will well understand, there was no opportunity to speak to him when I was in Dublin most recently.

The Taoiseach asked to speak to me last night, however, about a number of different matters and, in the course of the conversation, I felt it was my duty to mention this matter to him. I explained carefully to him the circumstances in which you had asked me for a personal view.

The Taoiseach considered your ideas at some length and he then asked me to send you a brief note conveying the following points:

1. He believes that to proceed with a consultative paper outlining these ideas in advance of the Westminster general election would be to give to Provisional Sinn Fein a considerable - and entirely unexpected - propaganda bonus which they would use to effect to hold and possibly even expand their own support in that

election; Sinn Fein would say to those who had supported them that this was an attempt by the British authorities to deprive nationalists of their democratic rights and so force them to vote in a particular way. Sinn Fein would urge nationalists to demonstrate to the British authorities that this was unacceptable in the only manner open to nationalists to do so, i.e. by voting for Sinn Fein in the Westminster election. (Note: in making this point, the Taoiseach perfectly understood that it is not your intention that the initiative would apply to Westminster elections, but rather to local elections only; he thinks, however, that the proposal to restrict the measure to local elections because of possible difficulties in Great Britain with its application to general elections there would be seen by many in Ireland as somewhat offensive.) The Taoiseach considers that it would be to the tragic disadvantage of the Agreement and of both Governments were Sinn Fein thus put in a position to enhance their own electoral chances and correspondingly damage those of constitutional politicians because of an initiative which had been intended to undermine Sinn Fein.

2. The Taoiseach recalled that this particular idea, when it was mooted some time ago, was not supported either by the SDLP or the Alliance parties. He considers that, from the point of view of ensuring the best chances for electoral defeat of Sinn Fein, both of these parties would need to be convinced that what was being brought forward would not damage the prospect of securing that objective; rather the contrary.
3. The Taoiseach recalled that you had yourself proposed to Mr. Barry at the first meeting of the Conference on 11 December 1985 that this matter should be discussed in the Conference and that Mr. Barry had agreed. The Taoiseach feels that the matter should therefore be considered in the Conference before any public action is taken. He is convinced that the best hope for success in this area would be to ensure that whatever action was proposed had the support of both Governments.
4. He stressed very strongly that he understands why the Administration here is seeking to find a way of dealing with the problems caused, particularly for unionist members of the Councils, by Sinn Fein. He sympathises strongly with the position of unionist councillors and believes that a way must be found to help them.

The Taoiseach and Mrs. FitzGerald directed me very particularly to give you their good wishes and to ask you to remember them to Mrs. King.

Yours sincerely,

  
M. J. Lillis  
Joint Secretary