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SECRET AND PERSONAL

European Council: Meeting with British Prime Minister

Taoiseach

Mr Charles Powell, Mrs Thatcher's principal Private Secretary, phoned this morning to say that the most suitable time for a meeting with the Prime Minister in the margins of the Council would probably be when the Council adjourns on the evening of the first day, probably about 6 p.m. or 7 p.m. There would probably be about half an hour free then. I agreed, tentatively, and said that we could firm up the arrangements in Brussels. On present intentions he will be accompanying the Prime Minister at any meeting.

The British Ambassador then called to deliver the Prime Minister's reply to your letter of congratulations and to discuss the meeting in more detail. I stressed that anything I said was purely personal and without commitment. We discussed the importance of the contact, which could set the tone for Anglo-Irish relations for years ahead. The Ambassador said that, in his view, the Prime Minister's principal concern would be security and measures to defeat the IRA. I said that there should be no doubt whatsoever about your commitment to defeat violence. The Ambassador said that it would be a very good idea, in the interests of a harmonious relationship, to emphasise this point very strongly at the meeting. When the point was established, many other matters or points of detail would fall into place.

The Ambassador went on to say that, on his reading, the Prime Minister would be concerned essentially with three points:-

- (1) security
- (2) the Unionists, and
- (3) the Agreement.

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On past form, the Prime Minister is likely to stress the way in which the border can be and is used for attacks in Northern Ireland. She has said at meetings of this sort, on more than one occasion, and more in sorrow than in anger, that it is probably impossible for us to provide men and resources on the scale needed to provide 100% security on the border. She will probably mention the number of known IRA activists living in and about Dundalk and in other border areas, about whom, apparently, the Gardai do nothing. She will probably also stress the need for better surveillance and better contact between the security forces. (I think it is highly important that you should get a briefing from Justice, and the Garda Commissioner, on these aspects. The list of suspected activists recently handed over may come up.) Extradition could also come up, though there was no certainty on this.

On the Unionists, the Ambassador said that the British had no intention whatsoever of taking the initiative. Neither would they do anything without letting us know what they intended. The Secretary of State in his Commons statement had set the tone of British policy by stressing the word "response". If the Unionists wanted to move in a certain direction or wanted to open discussions, then it was up to them to start the ball rolling. It would be irresponsible of the British not to listen to what the Unionists had to say but they would do nothing to get them off the hook on which they had impaled themselves.

The Ambassador said that they were sensitive to your views on devolution and would, of course, take them into account in any developments. Their intention was to make progress, if any, only in consultation with Dublin.

On the Agreement, the Ambassador said that too heavy an emphasis on it, at present, might abort Unionist moves to come back into the fold. The British would continue to work the Agreement and participate fully in all its institutions. The Prime Minister was totally committed to it and would remain so.

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Apart from the assurances on security, I said that there were considerable parts of the Agreement on which there had been no delivery insofar as the Nationalist population of Northern Ireland was concerned. For example, moves on the courts, on which there was a specific commitment in the Agreement, had been minimal. Only lip service had been paid to "confidence in the administration of justice". I mentioned misgivings about the Birmingham Six and Guildford Four cases - which, admittedly, had nothing to do with the Northern Ireland courts, as such. I said that though relations between the minority community and the police had improved, largely because of the way in which the police were now handling Orange marches, there were parts of the Agreement which had not yet been implemented - in particular, accompaniment of the UDR, the Code of Conduct, and the programme of special measures to make the security forces more readily accepted by the Nationalist community. I also mentioned Sellafield - and stressed that we were aware of the Prime Minister's sensitivities on this point.

I said that I was mentioning these items not as an indication of what you might say when you met the Prime Minister but simply to list concerns as we felt them here. A meeting at which you and the Prime Minister got into detail of grievances which each had or perceived was most unlikely to be constructive or cordial; and that probably the worst way of achieving real progress would be through presentation, by either side, of a list of "demands". This would defeat what we both thought could be an important result of the meeting - the establishment of a good relationship at the highest level of Government, between the two countries. I said that the content of your recent letter of congratulations to the Prime Minister set out your priorities in this area, of which Northern Ireland was only one.

The practice with these meetings, which have been held on the occasion of European Councils, without exception, for about a decade, has been that neither side speaks to the press or makes any other public announcement about the subjects covered. For this reason, the meetings can be a very useful vehicle for a real exchange of views. The Ambassador and I said that we would both recommend that the practice up to now should be followed on this occasion also.

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The Ambassador left the attached draft press statement as a basis for discussion, for issue after the meeting. I made some comments on it, including the comment that the reference to enhancing security co-operation might be interpreted critically.



Dermot Nally

19 June 1987