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IRISH EMBASSY LONDON

17 Grosvenor Place,
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13 September, 1988.

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Mr. Dermot Gallagher,
Assistant Secretary,
Department of Foreign Affairs.

Dear Assistant Secretary,

A meeting with Anthony Teasdale, Political Adviser
to Sir Geoffrey Howe

I met Teasdale by appointment to renew contact after the Summer break. After a general summary of developments, I mentioned a number of matters of interest, including recent meetings in London convened by Mrs Thatcher, and tried to draw him out on what has been happening and what the present state of mind is in British Government circles.

Teasdale had only recently come back from vacation and was, he said, swamped with problems other than Northern Ireland, including the preparation of a number of major speeches for Howe (such as the Tory Conference speech); I felt, however, that the general reticence detected in London about the recent meetings extended to him too: there would seem to have been some form of restriction placed on any publicity to do with those discussions. However, the following broad points emerged from Teasdale in the course of a lengthy conversation.

- The fact that the Prime Minister chaired the meetings should not lead us to conclude that they have been hammering out a major new policy line. We should "not over-draw conclusions". They were "not great water-shed sessions, brain-storming sessions to produce new policy". Rather, "the P.M. was getting in on meetings which go on anyway" and which, he said, in August's circumstances, were bound to be more frequent and more urgent. The media attention they generated is ridiculous: Lawson meets her several times every week. It only attracts attention when there's a potential policy difference in the air, when the fact of such a meeting becomes a great matter in the media.
- The starting point of the two meetings (other than the first meeting which she convened following the bus bomb when she returned to London from Cornwall) was Gibraltar, at two levels.

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Firstly, they - Ministers - are not at all happy with the way things are going in Gibraltar; secondly, they have been considering a very big overhaul of the way Ministers and services concerned are briefed on developments, the way they are to react to them and the co-ordination of intelligence.

- On the first point he said that there has been very serious dissatisfaction on the part of Ministers with the way the Gibraltar operation was co-ordinated both before and after the killings. As to the operation itself, he said that relations between the NIO, the RUC and the British Army were very bad and communications, the sharing of intelligence and co-ordination suffered badly as a result. As it all came out afterward, there was incredulity and a determination to put it right. As to the follow-up to the killings, he said that Geoffrey Howe was only told 19 minutes before his Commons statement almost 24 hours after the killings that there had been no bomb in the suspect car. He was "all over the ropes" putting together a line for the Commons. "This can never happen again".
- On the second point he said that there has been a big overhaul of the way in which Ministers (Howe, Hurd, Younger, King and the Attorney General) and their services (MI6, MI5, Army/SAS, NIO/RUC, Law Officers' Department) will all be locked into each other in future crises (to do with Ireland or with anything else) regarding both the sharing of intelligence and the co-ordination of action. This has now been done, he said. If any individual or service has reason to hold something back, the fact that it has been done will become apparent (he did not say how) and it will be dealt with.
- Apart from these two points which, he said, took up discussion time, there was also concern at the shifting focus of the problem of violence, as Ministers saw it. He explained that whereas until recently - until Gibraltar - the focus has been on IRA violence as it waxes and wanes, and how to deal with it - waiting for the next spasm and hoping for a break on the pre-emptive intelligence side, now, he said, the focus has become their own anti-terrorist methods. He said they do not see the "dilemma" posed by Gibraltar as a one-off problem either. He said there is a "serious dilemma in the Government" over where they stand vis-a-vis IRA terrorism.

How can you win?, he said: if you stand emphatically, and as a matter of course, over what the SAS do, then the Gibraltar request, or something else in the future, will hang a shoot-to-kill policy like an albatross around your neck. A majority of those in the Government, and the vast majority of people in Britain, favour shoot-to-kill, but the Government's hands are tied. He said there is gloom among Ministers. There was talk of "no end in sight" and "another twenty years, maybe twenty years beyond that again". While he had no time, he said, for the concept of an acceptable level of violence, he wondered whether, at present, something like this concept may not be settling in a resigned way upon Government Ministers. They (the Government) are not winning the fight against the IRA. But, despite the spectacular spasms from time to time (IRA hits"), they are not losing it either. The pattern of violence is a line, which soars occasionally and often falls too, but is basically consistent.

He wondered whether, in Ministers' minds, it can be any different for the foreseeable future.

I elaborated at some length the Government's concern across the board, including Gibraltar, extradition and the desirability of opening dialogue with the Unionists without pre-conditions on any side. Teasdale had no difficulty with our broad perceptions and approach and certainly not with the idea of Dublin trying to open up dialogue - an "Irish dialogue", I called it - with the Unionists. He, for his part, would be interested to hear our views about the review process toward the end of the year. He favours taking it pretty firmly in hand and bending it to suit the best interests of the two Governments at the time.

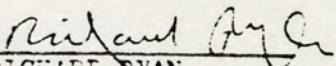
We agreed to meet again in a fortnight.

CONCLUSION

Although the recent Ministerial discussions in London were clearly confidential, one could not draw from Teasdale's conversation anything to imply that Government thinking has forked off in any new or dramatic way. He stressed in an emphatic way the extent to which the "dilemma" referred to above is affecting the Ministers concerned, including Mrs. Thatcher. It would seem that there is for the present a measure of gloom in London as to how best to go forward on the security front. However, it would seem that, in terms of the new structures referred to, they are at least in a position to respond in a much more co-ordinated way to future events. It remains to be seen, of course, how this will work out. Insofar as we have had serious difficulty in the past, however, with the precise problem of British decisions/ actions which are unco-ordinated at Government/inter-Ministerial level (such as Stalker-Sampsen), the new arrangements could, - in theory at least - be of positive interest to us.

I will try to explore these points further when I meet Teasdale again.

Yours sincerely,


RICHARD RYAN
Minister-Counsellor