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17 June 1988

Mr Keenan
23.1.88

cc P.S. Tavisoch
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PS
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Box

Dear Assistant Secretary

A meeting with Norman Tebbit

We met in the Commons and spoke for 45 minutes. Tebbit was very bullish at the beginning. He said that public opinion in Britain and Parliament will not put up for much longer with non-delivery by the Irish. He meant McVeigh, he said, but he also meant the failure by the Republic in the security area. He also meant the Taoiseach's American statements and the views expressed by the Taoiseach over Gibraltar and shoot-to-kill generally. He attacked the Taoiseach's ambivalence about violence as perceived from Britain.

I took him at some length through the issues he raised, one by one.

On non-delivery by the Irish, I argued to him that, seen from Dublin, non-delivery on the British side is the perception, and I illustrated this with major areas of difficulty in the Conference agenda.

On McVeigh, I cited the Taoiseach's, the Minister for Justice's and our Attorney's responses. I said I could not support the district justice's judgement which is being appealed, but what would he like us to do other than what is being done?

On security co-operation I asked whether he would not agree that the overall target would not be to bring the RUC from being a para-military force, which has necessarily lost any quality as a bobby-on-the-beat force, back down toward normality as reasonably represented by the Garda, rather than vice versa. He agreed that this could be a real litmus test of success, and said he did not at a personal level disagree with the basic arguments I had made about our total commitment to effective security measures (he was, I think, impressed when I

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transposed the scale of Operation Mallard to a British context). He said, however, that as far as the vast majority of people in Britain are concerned we are at war in Northern Ireland. They expect the Republic to weigh in as heavily as the British and there is no way they understand anything less than that. I asked him whether he did not see a specific role for such as himself to try to lift British perceptions of the reality of the matter above the level of the gutter press. He said, wryly, that he acknowledged this, and asked whether his Sunday Express piece had caused offence. I said frankly that I thought it was personally offensive. He said he had to blow off some steam that weekend and did not intend personal offence to the Taoiseach. But, he said, if Mrs Thatcher were to fight the next election on one single issue - support for a shoot-to-kill policy - she would win with a majority of 300 seats if the opposition fought it on an anti shoot-to-kill policy. That, he said, is a reality that we should not forget.

On the Taoiseach's U.S. statements, I gave him a presentation about the Taoiseach's expertise vis-a-vis the Irish-Americans, his judgement as to the right body language, his target of marginalising Noraid, and so on. I went on to elaborate the Taoiseach's wider philosophy in which the Agreement has an assured place; and I expressed regret that this philosophy does not seem to be seen by Mrs Thatcher whose perceptions seem to be narrowly focussed on the security element of the Agreement. I believe Tebbit took this well - he certainly heard it out and acknowledged the points as they were made.

He said he agreed that if he is right, and if public opinion and Parliament will not "put up" with the state of affairs, that can however not mean anything in constitutional terms other than withdrawal from Ireland. I said that his tone of voice at the beginning seemed to imply that the Republic was somehow infirm and would get its come uppins in some way from British frustration. I argued that there are many in the Republic who see the problem as a British one and as exacerbated by British bungling. I argued that he should see it as essential that Dublin and London must together try to get ahead of events, to try together to pre-empt and establish rather than react to an agenda set by the men of violence.

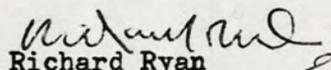
He said that Mrs Thatcher is very straightforward. If there are differences of perception he (Tebbit) could not sort her out; Tom King could not either; nor could Geoffrey Howe. He knew that the Taoiseach and Mrs Thatcher may meet at Hanover. Did the Taoiseach plan to set things to rights then, he asked. I said I felt that it could be very valuable for Mrs Thatcher to have the benefit

of sufficient time to hear and understand better the whole approach of the Taoiseach. I mentioned that I had found, virtually without exception, that when I presented this philosophy to Westminster politicians, they said they understood it and would not disagree with it in the round. It would be in the interests of the Anglo-Irish relationship and of making progress in Northern Ireland that Mrs Thatcher should permit herself to hear out this philosophy at first hand and to absorb it: if the same Taoiseach and Prime Minister seem set to be in the landscape for the foreseeable future, I suggested that, apart from other considerations, it would be pragmatic of the British to think along these lines.

At this stage the conversation was much less confrontational than at the beginning (it took place in the Inner Lobby and was initially the subject of some comment from observers passing in and out of the Chamber). Tebbit's manner is naturally aggressive and provocative in style. I apologise for including here much of what I said but I saw the meeting as an opportunity to get as much as possible across into Tebbit's head even if this meant - as it often did - cutting across the points he tended to make, initially at least, in a harsh and combative fashion.

We parted in a very friendly way, and he said he would like to meet again to continue the conversation.

Yours sincerely


Richard Ryan
Minister-Counsellor