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Meeting between the Taoiseach and the British Ambassador,  
Nicholas Fenn, 26 April 1988

Following his return from the United States yesterday, the Taoiseach instructed that the British Ambassador, Nicholas Fenn, be asked to call to see him. The meeting took place this (Tuesday) morning at 10 a.m. and lasted for about forty minutes. Mr. Nally and the undersigned were also present.

The Taoiseach had before him a copy of my note of points raised with me by Ambassador Fenn on Friday last 22 April and he directed his comments in large part to what the Ambassador had said on that occasion.

Summary

The Taoiseach was concerned to make two main points to the Ambassador

- (i) that his position and that of the Government on violence is absolutely clear - so clear that it is unnecessary to continue to repeat it on every possible occasion. To do so could devalue the language used; and granted the nature of his audiences in America, it would have been counter-productive to "lecture" them on violence since there is no way they would support it; and
- (ii) that his visit to the United States had been a great success precisely because he knew his audience and how to address it. He had been able, for the first time since the troubles started, to reduce the Noraid type opposition to little more than a disorderly rabble.

Ambassador Fenn on his side said he would report faithfully the Taoiseach's views. He said that Sir Geoffrey Howe's speech on Friday last (which the Taoiseach had warmly commended) was only part of the British Government reaction to the Taoiseach's American speeches and that behind it, though not made public, there was very considerable concern about what was seen as the absence of condemnation of violence in a series of general statements by the Taoiseach on the Northern Ireland problem.

Details

The following account of the meeting is put in the form of direct speech and is based on detailed notes. It is not, however, a verbatim record.

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Mr. Nally  
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yourselves  
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Taoiseach Thank you very much for coming. I want to talk to you about my American visit. I think there is a great deal of misunderstanding and a failure of communication. I have to tell you that I am quite irritated on reading Mr. Dorr's account of what you said to him on Friday last.

I want to say to you emphatically that my visit to the United States was a total and complete success from the viewpoint of counteracting Noraid. For the first time since the troubles began we have reduced Noraid to a small disorganised group of protestors and completely reversed the previous situation. They spent \$10,000 on an emotive advertisement calling for a protest against my visit. In the event the protest completely fizzled out. We succeeded in bringing over to our side the vast majority of Irish American opinion - including for example people like Paul O'Dwyer and Frank Durkan. Fr. Seán McManus and the Irish National Caucus stayed away from the protests. There were only a small number of demonstrators - they were isolated and reduced to two or three hundred in New York and to a few individuals in Boston.

Next, I want to say that the people I was talking to in New York are respectable American professional people - bankers, lawyers and so on. It is an insult to them to tell them not to support violence. They do not believe in it. Under no circumstances would they support it. To suggest that I should lecture them is totally to misread the situation.

I do not want to get into the details. I want to give you an overall message. I understand the Irish Americans. I know the whole scene. I know how they can be weaned away from support for violence. If I may say so I understand them far better than British Ministers such as those who, for example, tell Mayor Flynn of Boston that he should not support violence! If British Ministers would let me handle their visits I could do a far better job for them!

I want to come back again to the simple thing that we have isolated and reduced to an impotent rabble the extreme element - on the basis of this visit and my understanding of what motivates Irish Americans.

Ambassador Fenn Thank you Taoiseach. I have taken that aboard. You are right - there is a problem of communication between us.

If I may I would first like to say thank you for your letter sending me your speeches. I hope that you in turn saw the speech (on Friday last) by Sir Geoffrey Howe?

Taoiseach Yes I did see it. I am very thankful for it. I want to send a special message of appreciation to Sir Geoffrey Howe and I would ask you to do this for me. I may perhaps even write to him. If we had more of that sort of approach, things would be very much better.

I will tell the Dáil that I am not going to be a parrot (i.e. to repeat in a parrot like fashion the condemnation of violence). For example Mrs. Thatcher condemns the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan with all her heart. That is quite clear and has been well understood but she does not speak about it every minute.

Ambassador Fenn The speech by Sir Geoffrey Howe was intended to be helpful. It was carefully constructive but it did not represent the whole of British Government feeling. There was a deliberate decision however to take that part of British Government feeling which would be helpful (i.e. to emphasise and make public the constructive elements as mentioned in the Howe speech rather than the criticisms and concerns which were also there). Nevertheless what I said to Noel (Dorr) about the strong views in London was said on instructions. Of course I understand what you say and I defer to your knowledge of Irish America. But it need not be "lecturing" to state in a major speech that part of your policy - your attitude to violence - which we know exists. The absence of such a reference cause great concern. There was grave feeling in the British Government and this strong feeling was restrained with great difficulty from reaching the public.

Taoiseach (interjecting). - You are wrong. That is part of the trouble. The bulk of Irish Americans are sensitive in regard to this constant criticism in America about violence. They want to be as far away as possible from it. They just want to respond by giving support to the Irish Government. They are far more interested in the Irish economy than in Northern Ireland. They would resent it (i.e. lecturing them on violence). I am talking to them (with emphasis) - I cannot say "the next bit is for that rabble outside". They (i.e. those outside) would not listen to me anyway.

You should also know that immediately afterwards I gave a press conference to journalists in which I stated my position clearly.

Ambassador Noel (Dorr) told me that. That was helpful. Could I ask you to include this in your statement in the Dáil?

Taoiseach Maybe. I have to say that, apparently by a strange coincidence, Des O'Malley in his criticism has emphasised the same theme. I wonder if someone has been talking to him?

Ambassador I have not spoken to Mr. O'Malley. I exchanged two sentences with Mr. Dukes on the margin of a rugby match. Please don't entertain that suspicion. I do not see it as my business to make life more difficult for you politically. But I do see it as my business to contribute to understanding.

Taoiseach They (the Opposition) do not understand. The whole campaign against the MacBride Principles in the United States was a great mistake. It gave Noraid and their supporters something to focus on. Our diplomatic service was the same under the previous Government. The Irish American is very difficult to handle. It needs a great knowledge of the motivation and outlook of the people concerned; and it also requires a good knowledge of who these people are and what moves them.

Ambassador Well we must try to learn.

Taoiseach I would gladly run a course for British diplomats and Ministers. I am exagerrating this a bit here of course but it is still basically true.

Ambassador We keep in close touch with the Irish Embassy in Washington. We may be hamfisted at times in our approach but we do keep in close touch with you through the Embassy.

Taoiseach I could understand your problem there because the approach of this Government is very different from that of the previous Government. The Coalition Government was quite mistaken on this issue and therefore I could not fault the British Government on that. Garret FitzGerald in all sincerity was opposed to violence but he lectured them about it and that was counter-productive.

Ambassador I will do my best to explain your position to British Ministers. They were shocked at the absence of references to violence in your speeches. Could you find an early opportunity to restate your position on that? I do not think it is unreasonable to ask?

Taoiseach I do. How many objectives of British policy are taken for granted without constant reiteration? (i.e. the British Government has a strong position on many issues but it does not find it necessary to repeat it constantly on every occasion). Words begin to lose their effect - we run out of words. The word "barbaric" for example has now become commonplace. Do you understand?

Ambassador Yes. I hope you also understand my position?

Taoiseach Yes. The point about our attitude to violence should now be axiomatic. It should only need to be reiterated

in response to specific questions from journalists.

Ambassador You must be the judge of that Sir. It seemed to us however that in a major review of your policy you should find some space for this point.

Taoiseach It was not omitted as a deliberate choice. It simply did not arise in the context of the people I was talking to. Listen - if you are a pillar of Wall Street and a visiting Prime Minister tells you not to send money to the IRA - what are you to think?

Ambassador Prime Minister Thatcher does say that kind of thing (i.e. to such an audience). It is not that she is lecturing them but she is seeking their assent. You know Taoiseach, if I may so, your British colleagues have faced terrorism themselves. They have been blown up in Brighton and elsewhere. They have lost good friends. They are somewhat disconcerted when their colleagues and friends (i.e. Irish Ministers) do not speak out clearly on violence in a context where they would look for such things to be said.

Taoiseach How far back do you have to go in the Dáil record to find my views?

Ambassador Not very far - I accept that.

Taoiseach The issue between us is whether it needs to be constantly reiterated. I do not think so.

Ambassador I will convey that, Sir, to my authorities.

Taoiseach I also want to emphasise to them very strongly the effectiveness of my visit. I do not know if you realise the pervasiveness of Noraid in the United State. For example we have a very effective young Consul in Boston who told me when I was there about a respected GAA club. He said "Noraid have taken them over". Now for the first time ever on this visit we have abolished them (i.e. Noraid). They were reduced to a rabble outside the Waldorf Astoria and did not appear at all in Boston. That is what counts. On the other hand we could berate people and drive them the other way.

Some of this is built in to the (Irish) American psyche. Some of them have considerable reservations about the Irish Government because they feel they had to emigrate. They would be inclined to take it out on a visiting Prime Minister. Now there is in addition a new wave of Irish emigrants. They would be almost ready-made for Noraid unless we keep in close touch with them - which I did. I want to emphasise that there is a very thin dividing line here. These things look totally different in

Boston from the way they look in Downing Street.

Ambassador But what you said in Boston is heard also in Downing Street.

Can we take it for granted in studying your speeches that the views you have formulated (in the past) on the Anglo-Irish Agreement have not changed?

Taoiseach Yes of course. I have repeated my position on that ad nauseum and there is no change in it.

Ambassador Can we take it therefore that your readiness to co-operate with us across the whole range of issues is undiminished? Forgive me but we do need an assurance sometimes.

Taoiseach Yes. Let me make this point. There are some indications the Unionists have a readiness to talk. Now the Unionists don't accept the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Therefore, ab initio, if I want to talk to the Unionists, if there is some kind of process, it must be to that extent outside the Anglo-Irish Agreement. After all Tom King is doing the same. He does this - why should I not also be able to talk of the possibility of a conference and see it as something outside the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Ambassador I wonder, Sir, if you would find it helpful to say a word of explanation about how you envisage this contact with the Unionists?

Taoiseach I don't know. I am playing it by ear. I am using some key words because Molyneux used them. In a way I am trying to send messages subliminally. There is no more to it than that.

Ambassador You know from our last conversation that there would be at least a difference of emphasis between us on that. Tom King is trying to promote something described generally as "devolution" without prejudice to developments in the longer term. Both Governments are formally committed to that in the Anglo-Irish Agreement though the ball is in our court.

Taoiseach The Anglo-Irish Agreement seems to me to be very specific on that point - devolution is a matter primarily for the parties in Northern Ireland and for the British Government though the Irish Government may put forward views and proposals. We are not however obliged to do so.

Ambassador The Agreement also says that the Irish Government support that policy (i.e. devolution). We are not saying that you should necessarily put forward proposals but the different

processes need not be in conflict. Tom King is trying in good faith to bring progress and I hope that the Irish Government could encourage John Hume in this direction.

Taoiseach I understand that the first meeting (between the SDLP and King) was very unhappy. In that context I have great faith and belief in John Hume. In that particular context I am more inclined to follow his view than to pressurise him into a particular stance.

One problem which I understand John Hume would have is security. The SDLP would not be happy in having security devolved. But if you do not devolve security then what is devolution about? This is a centre of concern of the SDLP.

Ambassador It is obviously central. But let them discuss them - first with us and then with the Unionists. There is another meeting with Tom King today. Clearly of course one cannot start by devolving security.

Perhaps, however, you could discuss this and other matters with Tom King when you meet him when he is here for the Anglo-Irish Conference on the 4th May? It could be a very good thing to establish direct relations with him to avoid misunderstanding. It is absolutely clear to me from our meeting this morning that we are not in tune in our thinking and it would be very helpful to discuss these issues. /<

Taoiseach My meeting with you this morning was partly to clear my mind of some irritation - but mainly to get across that my visit to the USA was a total success because I understand the realities there and I know how to deal with them. It is not immodest to say that I have a much better understanding (than British Ministers). Look at the outcome - the Irish Caucus are neutral or on the sidelines - let us keep our fingers crossed about that; Paul O'Dwyer and his legally oriented group are at least not hostile; Cardinal O'Connor, Cardinal Law and Mayor Ray Flynn - all these people with reason have given a level of coherence of support to the Irish Government in contrast to Noraid, (which I use here as a generic term).

I would like to emphasise also that point about a new wave of Irish emigrants. There may be anything from fifty to hundred and fifty thousand of them - I don't know. They could be the beginning of a new generation of Irish Americans for the next fifty years. What they are going to do is very important. It is one thing for some Irish Americans of the 1920s to be preaching a particular line but they are a dying breed. It is another thing altogether if a new generation of Irish Americans takes it up.

Ambassador Thank you Sir. I will report what you say and try

to explain to Ministers. Mrs. Thatcher, like you, will be answering questions in Parliament this afternoon. I hope she will not feel it necessary to say more than Sir Geoffrey Howe did in his speech but I cannot promise you that. She, like you Sir, has been irritated. There was concern and irritation in the British Government but it was decided that the best way to handle it was the Howe speech. I hope that she will stick with that line and not express the other side of the British Government's reaction which did not become public.

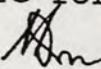
Taoiseach What Sir Geoffrey Howe said was totally helpful. It was very courageous - it was indeed what I would expect from him and I would like you to make my view on that very clear.

Ambassador Indeed Sir. The Foreign Secretary stuck his neck out courageously.

Taoiseach (summing up). We could lecture or hector Irish Americans. But what matters is which is the best way of being productive and not counter-productive.

Ambassador You understand Sir that the problem is that what you say is heard elsewhere too. Thank you Sir - this has been very helpful to me.

(The meeting ended at this point. As the Ambassador was taking his leave, the Taoiseach thanked him for coming to see him at such short notice; and in a more relaxed tone, said that he had, to some extent, been "letting off steam" because of his irritation at the criticism. This led to a jocular reference by the Ambassador to the definition of an Ambassador as a "doormat" laid down between Governments on which either side may walk. These parting exchanges served to ease somewhat the general severity of tone of the meeting itself and they are mentioned here for that reason).

  
N. Dorr  
Secretary  
DFA  
26 April 1988

cc. Mr. Nally, D/Taoiseach  
Mr. Matthews, D/Justice  
Mr. D. Gallagher, AI Division, DFA  
(Please circulate on a restricted basis - to Mr. Ó hUiginn (Secretariat), and Ambassadors London and Washington only)