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RELATIONS WITH THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND - RECENT HISTORY

1. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has the leading responsibility as regards the United Kingdom's relations with the Republic of Ireland. But as Northern Ireland is the most important and difficult factor in relations between the United Kingdom and the Republic, the NIO has a major input to UK Government policy as regards the Republic; equally the FCO has a legitimate interest in the NIO's policies.

POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

2. The main political parties in the Republic are Fianna Fail, led by Mr Charles Haughey; Fine Gael, led by Dr Garret FitzGerald; and the Labour Party led by Mr Dick Spring, the Deputy Prime Minister (Tanaiste) in the ruling Fine Gael/Labour coalition which came to power in November 1982. The fiscal policies it has had to pursue in the face of a severe economic situation lie uneasily with the socialist leanings of the Labour Party. Both parties have lost support since the General Election but the Labour Party has seen its support dwindle at an alarming rate particularly at the local elections in June this year. For the time being both parties seem likely to remain in the coalition rather than risk a possibly disastrous General Election.

3. For the Irish the partition of the island is at the heart of contemporary politics and is the main issue in Anglo-Irish relations. The division between the two main parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, goes back to the civil war which followed the establishment of the Free State in 1922 and partition remains a cherished grievance and an issue which is exploited between them. The Irish constitution lays claim to Northern Ireland as part of the national territory and the commitment to unity is a sacred ideal of both parties. Each of the main parties opposes the use of violence to achieve reunification but there are fundamental differences between them over the way in which unity should be obtained. Irish opinion, led by Dr FitzGerald, has

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increasingly recognised that the freely-given consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland is an essential precondition for Irish unity but there remains the deep-rooted view articulated by Mr Haughey that the central issue is the British presence and that by committing themselves to withdrawal and putting pressure on the Unionists the British could secure Unionist consent for a United Ireland.

IMPORTANCE OF ANGLO-IRISH RELATIONS TO NORTHERN IRELAND

4. For the United Kingdom, Anglo-Irish relations are important for a number of reasons. Cross-border security co-operation is vital to the campaign against terrorism. The activities of the IRA in some respects pose a more fundamental threat to the institutions and stability of the Republic than to the United Kingdom and successive Irish Governments have cooperated. But although this cooperation is satisfactory on a day to day level it could be improved and developed further. This co-operation also extends over a range of other practical cross-border matters.

The attitude of the Irish Government has a significant bearing on opinion in the rest of the world towards the Government's Northern Ireland policies, especially in the United States (see brief on The United States and other International issues).

5. Even more important, the state of Anglo-Irish relations affects the attitudes of both sides of the Northern Ireland community to Government policy. Many Unionists are suspicious of reapproachment between the two governments and particularly of any institutional links, which they regard as a framework for progress towards the Irish unity. They claim that successive Irish Governments have failed to suppress IRA terrorism emanating from the Republic. In particular, Unionists stress the importance of extraditing of fugitive terrorist suspects from the Republic. The nationalist minority in Northern Ireland see stronger cross-border links at all levels as an acknowledgement

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of their identity and aspirations. The SDLP have stressed the need for an insitutionalised 'Irish dimension'. Links between the SDLP and the Irish Government are strong, whichever party is in power. The support of the Republic's Government for UK policies would carry considerable weight with the SDLP and the minority.

DEVELOPMENTS SINCE 1979

6. The period 1979-1985 has seen four changes of Taoiseach and three changes of Government in Dublin, and witnessed several dramatic changes in the climate of Anglo-Irish relations.

7. A series of Joint studies commissioned by the Prime Minister and the then Taoiseach, Mr Haughey, at a Summit meeting in December 1980 became the subject of some controversy. Unionists were suspicious that the studies, covering possible new institutional structures, citizenship rights, security matters, economic co-operation and measures to encourage mutual understanding, constituted a significant step towards Irish unity, a view propagated by Mr Haughey for domestic reasons.

8. The most important conclusions of the Joint Studies report, presented at the November 1981 Summit, was that formal institutional structures should be created on three levels:-

- an Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council (AIIC) as a framework for meetings between the Heads of Government, Ministers and officials. (This was formally established in February 1982);
- an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Body with representation from both Westminster and the Dail, and with an opportunity for future participation by members of a Northern Ireland Assembly;
- an Advisory Committee on economic, social and cultural co-operation with representation from a wide range of

interests. (This was a long term objective, but an independent 'Encounter Organisation' was established as an interim measure in July 1983 to promote such exchanges between the two countries).

These structures had an East-West rather than a North-South orientation. In this they differed significantly from previous proposals for a Council of Ireland and Unionists should feel less threatened. The official Co-ordinating Committee and the AIIC is striving to put flesh on the bones of practical East-West co-operation between UK and Irish government departments.

9. Having weathered the hunger strike crisis in 1981 with Dr FitzGerald temporarily in office leading a coalition, Anglo-Irish relations passed through a difficult period during Mr Haughey's second term as Taoiseach (March-December 1982), both because of his active opposition to the proposals in the 1982 White Paper and because of the line he took during the Falklands conflict. His influence played a part in the SDLP's decision not to participate in the Assembly. Dr FitzGerald's return to power in December 1982 has led to warmer personal relations, and the summit meeting of 7 November 1983 set the seal on the restoration of good Anglo-Irish relations.

NEW IRELAND FORUM

10. Arising from Irish concern at the electoral success of Sinn Fein in the October 1982 Assembly elections and the apparent decline of the SDLP, the main parties in the Republic of Ireland and the SDLP set up the New Ireland Forum last year to consider how peace and stability might be secured in a "New Ireland" by democratic means.

11. The contents of the report, published on 2 May 1984, were a mixed bag. The introductory and historical sections were firmly nationalist in tone and critical of HMG, but there were important positive elements included in a list of "realities" and generous

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widely-drawn "requirements", which were offered as the criteria for any settlement. These included a condemnation of violence, a commitment to seek progress through the democratic process and an effort to recognise and respect the distinctive identity of Ulster Unionists. The report confirmed that Irish unity was to be sought only by agreement and with the consent of the people of Northern Ireland but it failed to face up to the fact that there is no reason to expect the people of Northern Ireland to consent to a change in sovereignty in any of the three forms suggested by the report: unitary state; federal/confederal state; and joint authority. The Government made it clear that there is no realistic prospect of consent for a united Ireland, or to a change in sovereignty in Northern Ireland in any of the forms suggested in the report.

THE ANGLO-IRISH DIALOGUE

12. The Taoiseach and the Prime Minister met in November 1984. The public perception of this meeting took little account of the valuable progress that was achieved. Public attention, initially at least, focussed on the Prime Minister's remark that the three options for Irish unity put forward in the Forum Report were "out". In fact the Summit did mark a good deal of progress. In particular in the Communique both the Prime Minister and Taoiseach reaffirmed that Northern Ireland's constitutional status would only be changed with the consent of a majority of the people there. The communique also set out a number of important principles agreed between the two Governments, in particular that "the identities of both the majority and minority communities should be recognised and respected, and reflected in the structures and processes of Northern Ireland in ways acceptable to both communities". The communique ended by noting that there should be close and continuing dialogue between the two Governments on this and other matters.

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13. This dialogue has continued. Its details have consistently been kept confidential although there have been a number of speculative articles in the press. When asked about the dialogue Ministers have stressed that the results of the dialogue would not affect Northern Ireland's position as a part of the United Kingdom. They have also indicated that they have in mind some sort of consultative role which would allow the Government to receive the views of the Irish Government in a more structured way. They have argued that the views of the Irish Government are particularly relevant because they reflect those of nationalist in Northern Ireland, many of whom identify with Dublin. Nevertheless unionist suspicions about the dialogue have increased. The DUP and UUP have drawn closer together and there has been talk of a 1974 - style workers' strike. (The Secretary of State will be briefed more fully on the dialogue and associated developments).

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