



Mr McKeown  
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821/97

ASST 08 324/9  
SEC 19 SEP 1997  
CENT SEC

FROM: C G MACCABE  
POLITICAL AFFAIRS DIVISION  
19 September 1997

cc Mr Thomas  
Mrs Brown  
Mr Canavan  
Mr Lavery



Mr Watkins

**“THE COMMONWEALTH OF IRELAND”**

Thank you for letting me see a copy of Mr Spence’s minute of 15 September.

2. This is certainly an interesting idea, and one that may be worth exploring at the appropriate moment. However, while I have no inclination to challenge the proposition itself (as Mr Spence fears we might) I would question some of the assumptions on which it is founded. For example, the reference to a Council of Ireland in paragraph 2. We have come a long way since 1974, when the inclusion of such a Council was one of the factors that destroyed the Sunningdale Agreement, and I doubt if such a concept, properly packaged, would necessarily be “strongly resisted” by Unionists today\*. Similarly, I would challenge the assertion in paragraph 3 that strong cross-border bodies with executive powers would **not** be sufficient for Nationalists. I have discussed the Strand II arrangements in Frameworks with a lot of Nationalists, including some Republicans, and have heard a consistent message that they would be an acceptable compromise, **provided the final product is identical with, or very similar to, that described in the document.**

3. One final thought: what about synthesising Mr Spence’s proposition with the UUP’s notion of a Council of the British Isles to produce a ‘Commonwealth of the British Isles’?

*Chris Maccabe*

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\* Ciaran McKeown (not someone I am often given to citing as an authority) takes a similar line in this morning’s News Letter.

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Mrs McAuley 6 L7814 821/97  
13 SEP 1997  
LD2110

Internal Memo

From: R B Spence  
Permanent Secretary

Your ref:  
Our ref: PSE 592/97

Tel: (5)41175/6

Date: 15 September 1997

To: Mr Watkins <sup>17.1</sup>  
Central Secretariat

cc: Mr Thomas

ASST 08 296/9  
SEC 18 SEP 1997  
CENT SEC



"THE COMMONWEALTH OF IRELAND"

As promised, I attach a note sketching out my suggestion for a possible new way of approaching the North-South dimension.

It is, by no means, a fully considered proposition and I don't want anyone to spend time listing all its weaknesses and explaining why it couldn't possible work!

Rather, I hope that we can park this suggestion and mull over it during the coming weeks. There is something in the approach which, I think, may prove helpful as events unfold.

RMS

R B SPENCE

1. as Mr Brown  
in  
in records

2. in history

Given X, I don't intend to reply. But my immediate response is certainly not to dismiss the notion - the reasons given in para 11 seem compelling to me.

But I will be interested in collegial negotiations.

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THE NORTH-SOUTH DIMENSION: A POSSIBLE WAY FORWARD

1. It is clear that the North-South dimension of the political talks process will be the most difficult. The broad shape of the "internal" and East-West aspects can be sketched out with a reasonable degree of confidence. However, the prospects for agreement on the critical North-South dimension seem at present to be very poor.
2. Unionists will find it difficult, if not impossible, to accept anything which is perceived to be a stepping stone to an united Ireland. A "Council of Ireland", (whether at Ministerial, parliamentary or official level) will be strongly resisted.
3. The alternative of "strong cross-border bodies with executive powers", even if accepted by unionists, will not be sufficient for nationalists. In any case, the scope for enhanced cross-border co-operation has been exhaustively explored and there seem unlikely to be many new ideas. The artificial creation of cross-border bodies, or an all-Ireland approach to marketing the joint tourist product, or an all-Ireland Ordnance Survey will not meet the aspirations of those seeking an united Ireland.
4. A way forward may, therefore, need the use of different language and concepts, perhaps even inventing new concepts. The North-South dimension might, I suggest, be managed more as a "process" than through creating contentious new structures.
5. It might be possible for the two Governments and the main political parties to agree an approach to the North South dimension based on the

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existence of, what might be called, "the common-wealth of Ireland".

6. The concept would accept that there are ties of geography, history, culture, family, etc which bind the whole of the island; that it is only common-sense for the different parts of the island to co-operate as good neighbours in doing things together where it makes sense to do so; that in many aspects of life, the island is the natural unit; that the people who live in Northern Ireland are obviously "Irish", though many reject the "Irishness" claimed by other people on the island, north and south.
7. This approach goes much further than acceptance of an "Irish dimension", but without embracing a belief that "Irish unity" must come at some stage.
8. The term "common-wealth" is suggested in its 17th Century sense. There are meant to be echoes of the use of the word in relation to the States in the USA, rather than to the "British Commonwealth" or "the Commonwealth of Australia". It would reflect "the existence of a condition", rather than describe a constitutional entity.
9. One method of presenting this approach would be to devise a way whereby the talks participants could register their agreement or declare that "a common-wealth of Ireland" exists.
10. It could then provide a new umbrella within which actions of common benefit to the people living in the island could be advanced. At the popular level, it could, for example, lead to acceptance of "the

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commonwealth of Ireland" description for all-Ireland sports teams and events; including, even in time, the design of a suitable flag and anthem for such occasions. At the political level, Ministers from the administrations based in Belfast and Dublin could meet, perhaps in time as the Council for the Commonwealth of Ireland, to explore mutual problems under this umbrella; in time, a "common-wealth secretariat" might be able to emerge without attracting excessive unionist anger and suspicion.

11. Nationalists could present this approach as, at last, recognising the essential unity of the island. Unionists would not, however, have to swallow high profile political structures and could sell the concept as good neighbourliness. It could be presented as "the final solution"; not a stepping stone to unity, but as a recognition of a reality.



**R B SPENCE**  
September 1997

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