



Dear Tony

ms 6/87

30 July 1998

PRIME MINISTER

A NEW BRITISH-IRISH RELATIONSHIP

I was grateful to Robin Cook for sending me a copy of his letter to you of 21 July.

I have also seen John Holmes' letter of 23 July.

I very much endorse the principle of thickening our relationship with Dublin. This is valuable in itself, given the historic ties between our nations, and because from the unionists' perspective it will help to dilute what they regard as the heavy preoccupation with Northern Ireland between the two Governments.

I am happy to support the proposals in Robin's letter though I am very anxious that they should be taken forward in a way which would not conflict with, or otherwise undermine the new East/West arrangements in the Belfast Agreement. There is, for example, a risk of confusion if we create an additional tier of Summits on top of those already agreed for the British-Irish Inter-Governmental Conference (BIIC) and the British-Irish Council (BIC). (The Agreement says that the BIIC will meet at Summit level - the Prime Minister and Taoiseach - "as required". and that the BIC will meet twice a year at Summit level.)

We would also risk creating difficulties for ourselves with David Trimble if we were to water down the remit of the BIIC by displacing East/West activity into a different Ministerial forum. As you will recall, it was a hard-won concession from the Irish that the BIIC should address all matters of mutual interest between the two



Governments at all levels, not just Northern Ireland related matters as under the current IGC, and we should not do anything to pull back from that agreement.

For these reasons, I suggest that any bilateral Summit held in the autumn - before the BIIC is constituted - should look forward to future Summits being held under the BIIC umbrella. This would be in line with the suggestion in Dominick Chilcott's letter to you of 29 May that major Summits of this kind "could be a top of the range version of the Summit meetings of the British-Irish Inter-Governmental Conference". The various policy areas for expanded co-operation, listed in the attachment to Robin's letter, could all fall within the BIIC or the BIC as necessary.

As to the possible time-tabling of events, we need to be clear on our priorities for the autumn. To keep on track with the implementation of the Belfast Agreement we must see the NI Executive established and the first meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council held in September or early October. In the context of Robin's minute, it is very strongly in our interest to give priority to you attending the first meeting of the British/Irish Council over and above any purely bilateral initiative. The BIC is very much Trimble's own idea as a counter-balance to the North/South Ministerial Council. He will not thank us for anything which detracts from it or appears to place more weight on the bilateral relationship in which of course the NI Executive will not play a part. Equally, we need to retain the flexibility to ensure that neither the BIC nor any bilateral summit gets ahead of developments on the North/South Ministerial Council, which may be caught up in general delay.

It is vital that all this is tied closely in with political developments in Northern Ireland over the autumn. A number of these important political



concerns were brought out in earlier discussions between officials, but appear to have been overlooked. With time short, I hope co-ordination arrangements can be improved.

Copies of this letter go to members of DOP, and to Jack Straw, Donald Dewar, Ron Davies and Sir Richard Wilson.

*Marjorie*

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