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 with a "Pan-Nationalist" Forum to exploit to gain legitimacy for their
 the Irish Government's stance in future political talks

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 and the Tanaiste said to the Dail on 17 December that point up to
 draw the Irish back to a more central role in the talks. The
 Taoiseach's remarks suggest that the two governments to work on a
 strands 2 and 3 of the talks. I refer to the Taoiseach's remarks
 that "the most pressing political agenda, after peace, is to create
 between Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland and
 between the North and South within a context of British-Irish
 British-Irish cooperation... If overall progress proves difficult,
 then let us proceed in a balanced way". What the Taoiseach has
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5. Mr Spring's remarks are more specific than those by
 the Taoiseach. I have in mind in particular his remarks in the
 Dail on 17 December:

Mr Thomas, NIO B

From: G R Archer
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cc: PS/PUS
 Sir T Daunt
 PS/SOSNI B
 PS/Michael Ancram B
 PS/PUS, NIO B
 PS/Mr Fell B
 Mr Watkins B
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NORTHERN IRELAND: WAYS FORWARD

1. We discussed next steps earlier this week and I have subsequently seen Mr Watkins' minute of 20 December commenting on the Taoiseach's remarks in the Dail on 17 December and the minute of 21 December from Mr Jagelman recording Michael Ancram's views. The following paragraphs consider Irish Government attitudes in the context of possible ways forward.

Irish Attitudes

2. The Taoiseach's Dail remarks and the speech by the Tanaiste on the same occasion subsequently circulated with Clive Barbour's note of 20 December are the best indication we have about current Irish attitudes. Like the Prime Minister, the Taoiseach has put a major political effort into the initiative on Northern Ireland. Irish Ministers will be as anxious as we are that any momentum achieved by favourable reactions to the Joint Declaration in the Republic as well as in the United Kingdom should not be lost in coming months.

3. The Taoiseach continues to make it clear that peace is the most pressing item on his political agenda. As we have seen there are dangers in this. The Irish have already been tempted into talking up the possibility of eventual compromise and further negotiation in the context of treatment of prisoners, and about the possibility of relaxation of the broadcasting ban in the hope that this will deliver PIRA. There must be a danger

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that in the New Year the Irish will become preoccupied with "rescuing the peace" or if PIRA/Sinn Fein respond positively with a "Pan-Nationalist" Forum which Sinn Fein might seek to exploit to gain legitimacy for their own demands or to toughen the Irish Government's stance in future political talks.

4. There are, however, some markers in what the Taoiseach and the Tanaiste said to the Dail which we could point up to draw the Irish back to a more useful dialogue with us. The Taoiseach's remarks suggest that the way is still open for the two governments to work on a "framework" in the context of Strands 2 and 3 of the talks. I refer in particular to the Taoiseach's remarks that "the most pressing item on the political agenda, after peace, is to create an accommodation between Unionists and Nationalists in Northern Ireland and between the North and South within a broad framework of British-Irish cooperation....If overall agreement at first proves difficult, then let us proceed by smaller steps in a balanced way". What the Taoiseach has said about the leaked Irish draft does not preclude an Irish response to our ideas.

5. Mr Spring's remarks are more encouraging than those by the Taoiseach, I have in mind in particular the following extracts from his remarks in the Dail on 17 December:

"The Declaration...creates in short a 'table where all can sit down to negotiate the future without loss of principle or damage to basic concerns".

"There is now a new situation, a new Government with a new policy and new personnel. If they felt that opportunities were missed in the last talks let them [those who complain about the conduct of the earlier talks] return to the table and at the very least test whether things have now changed, and whether a new approach is now possible".

"It is my hope it will soon be possible to begin building on the progress already registered in the political talks process".

"Both processes are complementary and, in the right circumstances, can reinforce each other".

Ways Forward

6. The Prime Minister in his remarks on 15 December called for the political discussions with the Northern Ireland constitutional parties being conducted by Michel Ancram to be intensified and your Minister of State has in mind a further round of bilateral contacts in the second week of January. We shall need to consider at the same time how to pick up further dialogue with the Irish. Options include:

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- No early further contact with the Irish. The arguments against this are that an input from the Irish will be necessary to any outcome from political talks acceptable to the Nationalists and would probably be a condition for SDLP involvement in any round table meeting. To leave the Irish marginalised while we discussed Strand III with the parties would forfeit Irish goodwill earned from the Statement and might result in new rigidity in Irish thinking. They moved during the Joint Statement exercise and we should keep the pressure up.

- A return to work in the Liaison Group to produce an agreed framework for progress acceptable to both governments that might become the basis for a Joint Statement that would persuade the Unionists to rejoin round table talks. A possibility would be to discuss ideas in the leaked draft which would not require a paper to be tabled.

- An attempt to use the Joint Declaration itself to find a new way forward. Given the favourable UUP response and the new commitments by the Irish Government in the Declaration is there any scope for using the Declaration itself in the way suggested by Mr Spring as the "table" for future negotiations?

7. There would be evident attractions in the last alternative for the Irish. We would not have to return to difficult and time-consuming negotiations in the Liaison Group where the Irish might stonewall. I recognise that the doubt must be whether the Unionists could be lined up to such an approach. In the event of no response from Sinn Fein, one argument for this course would be that to move forward would further isolate the terrorists. It also would perhaps be the only way of keeping up political momentum as we move to European elections. I suspect that the "framework" route could (as happened this year) run into mid-year inertia.

8. It is not for me to assess how Mr Molyneaux and the DUP would react to pressures to move although the route I propose is presumably likely to intensify DUP opposition. One possible reassurance to the UUP might be a return to the idea of HMG tabling a discussion paper at talks. The Irish do not like this approach but it is not a break point for them. I think that the Irish Government might well be attracted to the idea of a public commitment early in the New Year to move ahead with talks with constitutional parties based on the Declaration. I also believe that this would be as generally welcome in the Republic of Ireland as I would expect it would be within Great Britain. The problems in such a course, besides Unionist reluctance to move back into round table talks are the possibility that PIRA would react against this by a renewed commitment to violence. However, they would be taking the risk by this in further forfeiting any remaining good will. The offer of integration

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into the political process has been made and the further initiative would be seen to be developing from a Declaration which has been given wide international support. From the perspective of lining up the Irish to move without Sinn Fein this might be the easiest way forward.

(signed)

G R Archer

At the meeting with the Prime Minister at Hillsborough Castle on 12 October you advised that you would want to be satisfied that any plans would be taking place on the basis of Peter Hain's letter of 26 March 1991. This is the basis of the proposals in the letter and this is the basis of the proposals in the letter. It is also the basis of the proposals in the letter. It is also the basis of the proposals in the letter. It is also the basis of the proposals in the letter.

Given that this is the case, I hope you will now agree to participate in bilateral discussions with Michael Armitage. As you know, he has been involved in confidential exploratory discussions with the other parties over the past 3 months and there have been efforts to building a bridge between the different parties' positions in preparation for further bilateral talks at an appropriate time. The purpose and basis of the discussions are explained in Michael's letter to you of 26 August.

If you agree, it would be helpful if you could contact Michael's office to make arrangements for a meeting soon after the New Year holiday.

[Handwritten signature]