

CONFIDENTIAL & PERSONAL

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MEETING WITH THE TAOISEACH, 12 NOVEMBER

1. I enclose the promised account of Friday's meeting (I have not copied it: if you are content, could you please do this?) Our subsequent dinner with Mansergh and OhUiginn added little of substance. They sought to persuade us that they were justified in their assessment of what PIRA might need to call a halt to violence. We sought to persuade them - with difficulty - that a Joint Declaration could present the most severe political difficulties for the Prime Minister and the Government. We also explored to death the reasons for the fundamental misunderstanding between the two Heads of Government. The important thing is that following your visit we both have a better idea of the other's position.
2. You invited my comments. First, I believe that most of what the Taoiseach said can be taken at face value. He is convinced that an opportunity exists, and he wants to take it for the best of motives and because, as he put it, not to take it would be politically untenable. He has great faith in his relationship with the Prime Minister and he has gone out on a limb with nationalist opinion in the Republic (including some in his own party) and in Northern Ireland in coming out in British company against John Hume, Sinn Fein and the simplistic call for "peace". Like many Irish people, he believes that as regards Irish affairs the leaning curve of British politicians is steep and their attention span brief: another reason for him to go for it now. He also shares the widespread Irish assumption that the British, for whom Ireland is only one of many concerns, tend to get it wrong unless they are guided by the Irish. The resultant rather hectoring approach can easily look like threatening behaviour - as it did on Friday. Of course, the lines between guidance, warning and threat are thin ones, and the Irish are quite able to overstep them. Many of their recent public statements constitute an attempt to put pressure on us to behave sensibly, as they would see it, and this is doubtless one of the purposes of the Tanaiste's three-day visit to the United States beginning today.

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3. I would distrust what the Taoiseach said about the acceptability of the draft Declaration to unionists. I understand that Archbishop Eames' account of what he has told the Taoiseach is not quite what we heard from the Taoiseach on Friday. More generally, the Taoiseach (and the Tanaiste, and other Ministers) have a tendency to believe in the power of words to bridge gaps of substance; and to allow their judgment to be influenced by what they want to hear. (They recently came a cropper over EC structural funds for precisely these reasons.) They are therefore not the best brokers of texts - though I would trust Mansergh on this more than I would the others.
4. I was struck by the emotional way in which the Taoiseach reacted to our attempts to probe his views on alternative strategies (provoking a negative PIRA response; offering only a seat at the table as the price of the cessation of violence; issuing a declaration only when violence has stopped). He refused to discuss them and produced an artificial head of steam. This and his fake tantrum at the end of the meeting were obviously designed to underline his determination to proceed on the course he proposes and not be sidetracked. However, I believe that the views we heard from him and the others on nationalist and PIRA psychology were right. You objected that it was all theology; but they are theologians.
5. I find it difficult to say that we should do as the Taoiseach wants, because I am not the judge of unionist reactions and anyway I have not seen the draft text. But if we turn him down, I am reasonably certain that the Taoiseach's warnings about reaction in the Republic will prove correct, and that we risk some sort of a rupture with the Irish. How bad a rupture is hard to say. The Irish don't want a rupture any more than we do, and were Reynolds to escape from his hook - either by smoking out the Provisionals, or by finding an anodyne formula at the 3 December Summit which let the air out of the bag slowly - we might both escape without much damage. But some in the Irish Government (perhaps not Reynolds) would want to make us pay for ignoring their wishes, and there would be plenty of others - notably PIRA/Sinn Fein - eager to drive any wedges in deeper.
6. But I do believe that this could be a time of opportunity, and that we should do all we can to test it. A no-risk response would be unlikely to do this.