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From the Private Secretary

27 February 1992

Sean Wilentz,

NORTHERN IRELAND: THE PRIME MINISTER'S TALK WITH
THE IRISH PRIME MINISTER

Thank you for the briefing which you and the FCO provided for the Prime Minister's meeting this evening with Mr. Reynolds. The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach had an hour and a half of private discussion, with Dermot Nally and myself present as note-takers before they talked to the press in Downing Street and before the main dinner. I am sending a separate letter about the plenary discussion.

The meeting started with a discussion about politics. Mr. Reynolds said that he did not have to go to the country for some time. He was looking at the period of late 1993/early 1994 for an election. He implied that the Budget in 1994 was about the last moment.

The Prime Minister said he hoped he and Mr. Reynolds could agree to meet at least twice a year. They should let that be known. The more they were in touch the better. Mr. Reynolds said that he was pleased that the Prime Minister had called in the leaders of the Northern Ireland political parties. It kept up the pressure on them to make some moves. The Prime Minister said he had been concerned at the breakdown of the talks. He understood the reasons. The Unionists were not prepared to commit themselves to talks while they were unsure of the outcome of the General Election. The SDLP were not prepared to go into strand one without some assurance that the Unionists would not back out of subsequent stages. But neither stance was sustainable in the wake of the spate of murders. Now the Unionist leaders had agreed to consider whether they could resume talks. He hoped that Mr. Reynolds agreed with him that the leaders should talk, and the sooner the better. He wanted to assure Mr. Reynolds that he did not regard Northern Ireland a back-burner issue. It was on the front-burner and the Prime Minister would not forget about it after the Election.

Mr. Reynolds agreed that it was not right for the political leaders to stop talking given the level of carnage in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland was at the top of his agenda. He hoped that he and the Prime Minister could keep close together. The Prime Minister said that our partnership in the European Community would be helpful to that end. He would like to discuss

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with Mr. Reynolds where he thought we should be aiming to get to. How did we get there? How did we start? In the Prime Minister's view we had to move a step at a time. We could not carry people with us by any other means.

Mr. Reynolds said he was familiar with Northern Ireland. He lived 35 miles from the border. In his business life and private life he had travelled to Northern Ireland a lot. Kathleen and the kids had gone to and fro. He understood the feelings and aspirations of the people in Northern Ireland. He did not come at the problem from a particular angle. To come at it from a particular angle was a recipe for failure.

The Prime Minister said that he thought we should push the talks forward though we could not be sure they would succeed. In parallel we should look at confidence-building measures. The Prime Minister might make a speech in Dublin. He might make a speech in Northern Ireland, not necessarily about the troubles themselves. He and Mr. Reynolds might meet in Belfast as well as London. He had the impression that symbols were very important in Ireland. He recognised that a meeting in Belfast would shake some people to the core but it would show a new attitude. Perhaps the Prime Minister might go to Dublin to talk to Irish backbenchers. Mr. Reynolds might talk to backbenchers here in London.

Mr. Reynolds agreed. He knew the Prime Minister had been invited to the Institute of Directors meeting in Ireland in December. He hoped he would consider going. Mr. Reynolds said his attitude was governed by the knowledge that there had been 22 years of death and destruction. Was that going to extend to the next generation? The Prime Minister said that we must work through the system if we could. On his visit to Belfast he had been enormously struck by the goodwill and warmth of ordinary people. They wanted an end to violence. People on both sides of the community knew who was responsible for terrorism (Mr. Reynolds agreed). He wanted to create a climate where pressure was put on the terrorists because they became unacceptable in their own communities.

Mr. Reynolds asked, rhetorically, whether the talks were getting anywhere. He did not believe they were. He and the Prime Minister must get involved with their own agenda. The talks could go along in parallel. The Prime Minister said that he agreed that the more North/South co-operation there was the better, but while we judged that the three stranded talks had life in them, we needed to push them along. We needed to show whether they could work. Mr. Reynolds said we should also push out the limits of the Anglo-Irish conference. The Prime Minister said that it was a striking fact that in Northern Ireland and the Republic you had two neighbouring communities whose relationship was worse than that between any two other neighbouring communities in the European Community.

Mr. Reynolds said that there was a way to get peace and that was in the draft which had been initiated by John Hume. The last draft was not written in stone. He would be surprised if we could not find acceptable language. The Prime Minister said that

the Provisional IRA had shaken public opinion by the Teebane atrocity and by their bombing campaign on the mainland. The impression we had was that while Gerry Adams and one or two others might be feeling battle fatigue, the Provisional IRA as a whole were playing a cynical game. It was pretty difficult to go down the route of a public statement in those circumstances.

Mr. Reynolds said that he had approached the issue without prejudice. He, of course, had no dealings with the Provisional IRA but he had made enquiries as to whether the approach we were now seeing came from people who could deliver, i.e. from the PIRA Army Council. He had satisfied himself, and he could assure the Prime Minister that he knew what he was saying, that the messages we were getting came from the Army Council. Their latest word was that the present text was not written in stone. He was not talking about people operating on the fringes of the IRA. He was talking about the Army Council who were a very disciplined, cohesive group.

The Prime Minister said that in the wake of the upsurge in killings, it was hard for us to believe that the Provisional IRA were seriously interested in a ceasefire, let alone a ceasefire that would be sustained beyond about three months. Mr. Reynolds said that this was par for the course for the IRA. Whenever they were about to embark on something political, they stepped up the terrorist campaign. They would argue that they wanted to go into a ceasefire from a position of strength. The Prime Minister referred again to Teebane. Mr. Nally said that the word that reached the Irish Government was that Teebane had been a mistake - not that he wanted to be an apologist for PIRA.

The Prime Minister said that this issue had arisen as a result of an approach from John Hume. He had subsequently spoken to Mr. Haughey about it. Mr. Haughey's belief had been that a statement acceptable to the British Government could be found and that that statement would lead to a ceasefire. It was very difficult to sustain that belief in the wake of the upsurge of PIRA murders. Mr. Reynolds asked whether this meant that the Prime Minister wanted to leave the issue on one side. He was not pushing it. The Prime Minister said that he did not want to take the matter any further at present. He would reflect on it and get back to the Taoiseach. He did have it in mind to make a speech in Northern Ireland but this would not be until after the General Election.

Security

The Prime Minister referred to the four specific suggestions which he had put to Mr. Haughey at their last meeting. Mr. Reynolds referred to his brief which covered this issue indicating that the common automatic fingerprint recognition system was acceptable. He used the same arguments Mr. Haughey had used against a dedicated Garda anti-terrorist squad, i.e. that the structure of the Garda was different from our police. The Prime Minister said we had had in mind a unit in the border area. Mr. Nally said that that would not work. Mr. Reynolds referred to the sensitivity of direct Army to Garda communications (Mr. Nally told me subsequently that this idea

would never be acceptable). The Prime Minister asked about the procedure for discussing these issues. Mr. Nally said that they were discussed by Mr. Chilcot and Mr. Brosman who reported to the Ministerial conference of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. That was the right channel. Mr. Nally emphasised to me afterwards the importance the Irish attached to maintaining this channel (I do not think this was significant. At one point the Prime Minister said that we would be willing to have private discussions with Mr. Nally at any time on the security issues. I think Nally was simply anxious not to create a new channel on this particular issue).

The Prime Minister wondered whether there would be advantage in creating joint border posts manned by the Garda and the RUC. Mr. Reynolds said this would not work. The border was not the problem. Only one of the thirty people killed in Northern Ireland since the start of the year had been killed on the border. (I produced the figures from the brief showing the overall level of killings at or near the border but Mr. Nally disputed our figures). Mr. Reynolds said that co-operation between the security forces was excellent. The Irish police drew their strength from the fact that they were members of the local community on their side of the border and received intelligence from that route. If they were part of joint border posts, that intelligence would dry up. Irish security forces were already on the border. Ours were not. The systems were quite different. The feeling to the South of the border was very strongly against the terrorists. His message to his own security forces was "stop arguing about statistics - get on with the job".

Political Talks

The Prime Minister said that we sometimes talked about an end to the violence and a solution to the problems of Northern Ireland. What did Mr. Reynolds envisage as the end product? Mr. Reynolds said that we faced a divided community. In the rest of Europe all the old hatreds had been dealt with by new structures. There were plenty of structures around that could accommodate the two traditions. There were no instant solutions. It was a long-term issue. What did the Prime Minister think was the objective of the three-stranded talks? The Prime Minister said the first objective was to get people from the two traditions in Northern Ireland round the same table. We were looking for an accommodation between themselves, between North and South and, as a result, for still better relations between the Republic and the United Kingdom as a whole. No-one had yet devised a better way. If we stop walking down that path, that would be a huge setback. We had to give the three-stranded talks a further push. "Sure", said Mr. Reynolds. The Prime Minister said that we had dealt with many of the material grievances and problems of Northern Ireland. He was very willing to reaffirm the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Invited to comment by Mr. Reynolds, Mr. Nally said that the Irish could envisage a number of different models. One would be a Commission with three Commissioners elected from Northern Ireland by P.R., two from the Republic of Ireland and one from Brussels, or you could consider an inter-governmental conference

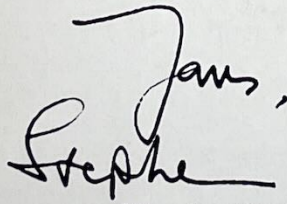
with delegated authority. A Commission could be the executive arm of a Parliamentary Assembly. They would discuss agriculture, relations with the European Community, the development of tourism etc. Many of these ideas were already contained in the Government of Ireland Act 1920. The Prime Minister commented that these were supra-national issues. He believed the first step had to be to get an acceptable form of government in the North. Mr. Nally said that the problem was the risk of perpetuating local bigotries.

The Prime Minister said that if you wanted people to move beyond existing positions, then you had to gain their trust. He himself did not yet have a feel for Northern Ireland and the people of Northern Ireland did not yet know him. That was why he wanted to go there and make speeches and get more of a feel so that confidence would be built up. Mr. Reynolds agreed. He had worked with people from Northern Ireland from both traditions. They were hard-working, shrewd and excellent colleagues provided you had their trust.

There followed a short discussion of what was to be said to the press. Mr. Reynolds was keen to refer, in the context of Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution, putting the Government of Ireland Act 1920 on the table. The Prime Minister counselled against this. Insofar as the Act referred to the supreme authority of the UK Parliament over Ireland, that was redundant because of the 1922 Act. Insofar as the 1920 Act referred to all-Ireland structures, that was seen by Unionists as an Irish wish to impose condominium. Mr. Reynolds said that was not the intention. He agreed not to refer to the issue when he and the Prime Minister spoke to the press.

This part of the meeting ended at 2000 hours.

I am copying this letter to Richard Gozney (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Sonia Phippard (Cabinet Office).


(J. S. WALL)

William Fittall, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.