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PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH MR REYNOLDS: 26 FEBRUARY: IRISH
MEDIA REACTIONS

SUMMARY

1. COVERAGE OF MEETING OVERSHADOWED BY SUPREME COURT RULING ON ABORTION. IRISH MEDIA UNDERLINE THE GOOD RELATIONS BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE TAOISEACH, THAT NORTHERN IRELAND WILL REMAIN AT THE TOP OF BOTH GOVERNMENTS' AGENDAS, THEIR SHARED OBJECTIVES, AND RENEWED BRITISH AND IRISH COMMITMENT TO THE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT.

DETAIL

2. THE PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH THE TAOISEACH ON 26 FEBRUARY HAS BEEN OVERSHADOWED BY THE SUPREME COURT'S DECISION ON THE ABORTION ISSUE, BUT ALL IRISH MEDIA REPORT IT FULLY. THE IRISH RADIO'S MORNING NEWS HEADLINE WAS THAT THE MEETING SHOWED THE TWO GOVERNMENTS HAD SHARED OBJECTIVES ON NORTHERN IRELAND.

3. THE TAOISEACH'S EMPHASIS ON BOTH GOVERNMENTS' COMMITMENT TO THE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT, HIS ASSERTION THAT NORTHERN IRELAND WOULD BE AT THE TOP OF BOTH GOVERNMENT'S AGENDAS, AND THEIR MUTUAL WISH TO SEE THE TALKS PROCESS BEGIN AGAIN SOON, ARE GIVEN COVERAGE IN ALL NEWSPAPERS. HIS PLEDGE THAT 'EVERY LEGITIMATE MEANS AT OUR DISPOSAL' WOULD BE USED TO TRY AND STOP THE VIOLENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND IS WIDELY REPORTED.

4. AT A PRESS CONFERENCE YESTERDAY EVENING CARRIED LIVE ON IRISH TELEVISION, THE TAOISEACH SAID THAT THE GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND ACT 1920 HAD BEEN DISCUSSED AND THAT IT DID NOT CONFLICT WITH ARTICLE 1 OF THE AGREEMENT: HE REFUSED TO BE DRAWN FURTHER. HE REPEATED HIS OBJECTIVE OF AN EVEN-HANDED APPROACH AND HIS BELIEF THAT REMOVAL OF ARTICLES 2 AND 3 OF THE IRISH CONSTITUTION ALONE WOULD NOT SOLVE THE NORTHERN IRELAND PROBLEM. IN A RADIO INTERVIEW ON 27 FEBRUARY THE FOREIGN MINISTER STRESSED THE GOOD RELATIONS BETWEEN THE TWO LEADERS



AND THE CONTINUITY OF POLICY TOWARDS NORTHERN IRELAND. HE ALSO HOPED FOR AN EARLY RESUMPTION OF THE TALKS PROCESS.

5. IN AN EDITORIAL COMMENT THE IRISH TIMES SAYS THAT THE MEETING WAS SIGNIFICANT. THE TAOISEACH HAS SHOWN HE WANTS A BREAK WITH THE PAST AND TO BRING A NEW MIND TO BEAR ON IRELAND'S OLDEST AND MOST INTRACTABLE PROBLEM: THE PRIME MINISTER THAT HE IS WILLING TO LEND HIS AUTHORITY TO THE PROCESS OF CHANGE. THE MEETING MAINTAINED THE MOMENTUM OF CONTACT BETWEEN DUBLIN AND LONDON. IT NOTES THAT ARTICLES 2 AND 3 OF THE IRISH CONSTITUTION AND THE GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND ACT 1920 ARE NOT STRICTLY COMPARABLE: THE ACT MAKES NO CLAIM OF SOVEREIGNTY. YET THEIR COUPLING WAS A 'HELPFUL' REMINDER THAT LEGISLATION PASSED IN 1937 AND 1920 'WHICH HAS CONTRIBUTED TO CREATING INFLEXIBLE MIND-SETS SHOULD BE RIGOROUSLY EXAMINED IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEEDS OF THE 1990S AND, IF FOUND WANTING, JUST AS RIGOROUSLY REJECTED'.

6. THE CORK EXAMINER NOTES THAT NEITHER THE TAOISEACH NOR THE PRIME MINISTER SAID MUCH EXCEPT TO PLEDGE THEIR COMMITMENT TO THE WORKING OF THE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT, 'IN A MESSAGE OBVIOUSLY INTENDED FOR UNIONISTS'.

7. OVERALL, THE MEDIA PORTRAY THE TAOISEACH AS HAVING GOT OFF TO A GOOD START WITH THE PRIME MINISTER.

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ADDITIONAL 53

27 February 1992

NORTHERN IRELAND

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PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH MR. REYNOLDS:
THE IRISH CONSTITUTION

Looking back through the records I have sent on last night's talks, I realise that I failed to record that the Prime Minister had said to Mr. Reynolds that it was helpful to us that he had indicated that Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution could be on the negotiating table. In reply, Mr. Reynolds said that he linked this with the Government of Ireland Act 1920. It was clear from the way he spoke that he was attracted by the Government of Ireland Act, not because he saw us repealing it as a quid pro quo for repeal of Articles 2 and 3, but because it contained examples of all-Ireland co-operation which he clearly saw as relevant to present needs, and indeed a precursor of the kind of co-operation now taking place within the European Community.

As my earlier letter pointed out, the Prime Minister told Mr. Reynolds that references of this kind to the 1920 Act were seen by Unionists as an attempt by the Irish to exercise some kind of condemnation. Mr. Reynolds denied that this was the case. The Unionist position was fully protected by Article 1 of the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

We have clearly not heard the last of this argument and the issue may warrant further analysis. Does the argument run in a wholly negative way from our point of view? Or are there things that we might want to do in co-operation with the Irish Government which we ourselves might want to justify in terms of the 1920 legislation?

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

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(J. S. 312)

William Pittall, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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