



Prime Minister

The only point for discussion now
is who accompanies you to Dublin ("A" oruleaf).
I would have favoured Lord Carrington,

Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

19 September 1980

Mr Atkins + one other Departmental Minister
to make it clear that this is a community meeting
+ not a N. Ireland summit. Agree?

Dear Michael,

Meeting between the Prime
Minister and the Taoiseach

Thank you for your letter of 11 September to Stephen Gomersall. We have now heard from Dublin that the dates which we proposed are acceptable and that the Taoiseach's strong preference is for the Prime Minister to stay in Dublin overnight. If the Prime Minister is to be back in London by mid-day on 9 December she will need to take off at around 0945, which suggests that the most which could be fitted in that morning would be a press conference, perhaps at the airport. We shall be consulting the Irish about accommodation arrangements and will let you have recommendations in due course.

British and Irish officials met in London last week. The object was to prepare the ground for the meeting between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister by exploring ways of giving substance to the "unique relationship". In the course of the meeting the Irish Ambassador made what was clearly a carefully prepared statement about the broad approach which the Taoiseach would wish to adopt. He underlined the importance the Taoiseach attached to new and close political cooperation between the two governments, but his prime concern was with the search for enduring peace and stability in Northern Ireland and "within these islands". While the Taoiseach would be anxious to have a broad discussion, his main aim would be to make some advance over the continuing grave situation in the North. The Irish Government had been in no way dismissive of the British Government's political initiative: they merely thought it inadequate. Their assessment was that it was highly unlikely that the continuing discussions between the Northern Ireland Secretary and the political leaders in Northern Ireland would be able to establish a worthwhile measure of agreement. In the Irish Government's view, the only way of making progress would be to raise the issue to an intergovernmental level, with the involvement of the political leaders in Northern Ireland. It was of course for the British Government to decide when to draw conclusions from the current discussions. The Taoiseach had in mind that when he saw the Prime Minister he would propose that "at an appropriate date, following the drawing of these conclusions", a conference should be convened between the two governments and the Northern Ireland political parties to discuss the three dimensions of the problem: relations between the communities in Northern Ireland; between the North and the South; and between Dublin and London.

/In reply



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In reply British officials said that they hoped the Irish Government were in no doubt that for the British Government to accept any such proposal would represent a very significant reversal of policy; and that they could see no grounds on which such a reversal could be recommended. But this was not the only obstacle: had the Irish any grounds for supposing that leaders of Unionist opinion in Northern Ireland would be ready even to contemplate attending such a conference? There was no reply.

The idea of a conference has been a central plank in the SDLP's policy for some time, and it is no surprise that the Taoiseach should have decided to press for it. If he could secure British endorsement of the idea, he could certainly expect to derive considerable advantage in domestic political terms. However, informal exchanges with Irish officials over the weekend suggest that the Taoiseach himself is in no doubt as to the Prime Minister's likely response to the proposal for a conference; that he is not at present looking for a confrontation; and that he would not necessarily envisage any publicity being given, at least for the time being, to his having put the proposal to the Prime Minister. Officials in the FCO and the NIO will of course be giving a good deal of thought to how we can best hope to head the Irish off. And there will be further opportunities to explore these matters with the Irish before briefing for the Prime Minister/Taoiseach meeting has to be prepared.

A. Officials have naturally stressed to the Irish the need to ensure that the Northern Ireland problem was not allowed to dominate the meeting between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach. The Irish accepted this, and there seem to be several areas (eg Transport, Energy and European Community issues) in which there would be scope for useful exchanges at Ministerial level. It ought therefore to be possible to devise an adequate and balanced agenda. As regards Ministerial attendance it would seem appropriate for the Prime Minister to be accompanied by the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Northern Ireland Secretary. It would also be open to the Prime Minister to take one or two other Ministers who had business to transact with their opposite numbers. But the Irish left us with the impression, without saying so in terms, that the Taoiseach is not much in favour of this idea, and would prefer other Ministers to meet separately from and perhaps in advance of the summit. It would be helpful to know the Prime Minister's preference on this point, which was left unresolved pending a firm decision as regards dates.

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I am copying this letter to Roy Harrington
(Northern Ireland Office) and David Wright (Cabinet
Office).

Yours ~~sa~~

A handwritten signature in blue ink that appears to read "Paul".

(P Lever)
Private Secretary

Michael Alexander Esq
10 Downing Street
London

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