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PRIME MINISTER

Anglo-Irish Relations: Northern Ireland

You will recall (Mr Coles's minute to me of 18 July) that British and Irish officials were to meet as necessary during the autumn to review the Joint Studies Action Check List and to prepare for the Anglo-Irish Summit on 7 November. The first such meeting took place on 6 September when Mr David Goodall visited Dublin at Irish invitation to discuss the programme of work. His Irish opposite number was Mr Michael Lillis, the Head of the Anglo-Irish Division in the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, who is a close personal associate of Dr FitzGerald's and was his Diplomatic Adviser when Dr FitzGerald was Taoiseach before. Mr Lillis had made a point of asking for a tete-a-tete conversation following the meeting; and this took place after a lunch attended by our Ambassador, Mr Alan Goodison, at which Mr Lillis had already begun to open up the possibility of a change in the Irish Government's attitude to the constitutional issue. Mr Lillis reverted to his ideas some days later in a further private conversation with Mr Goodall in the margins of the British Irish Association's conference at Oxford.

2. Mr Goodall had the strong impression that Mr Lillis was speaking with the knowledge and authority of the Taoiseach, and in the hope and expectation that what he said would be reported to British Ministers. Indeed, in the second conversation, he specifically asked Mr Goodall what reactions there had been to what he had said in the first conversation.

3. What follows summarises the content of both the conversations. Mr Lillis began by explaining that the tentative ideas he was about to float were those of the SDLP, including its "green wing". They were not yet the views of the Irish Government. But he was emphatic that the Taoiseach, with whom he said he had spent the previous evening discussing them, would be prepared to back them. He said that the outcome of the abortion referendum in the Republic would put paid, at least for the time being, to any prospect of

early success for the Irish Government's policy of seeking to remove Protestant and liberal concerns about the Republic's Catholic ethos. This was regrettable and would no doubt damage relations with the North. At the same time it would have the merit of clarifying the situation and forcing nationalist opinion to face up to the reality of partition and the fact that unification was at best a long term aspiration, not a political objective. Politically, the overriding objective from the Republic's point of view (and that of the SDLP) was not unification, but the restoration of stability in Northern Ireland before the SDLP were eclipsed by Sinn Fein and the consequent unrest in the North infected the whole of Ireland. The crucial precondition for a return to stability in the North was that the minority there should recover confidence in the processes of law and order, from which they at present felt profoundly alienated.

4. What the SDLP were groping towards, therefore, was some sort of package whereby they and the Government of the Republic would formally recognise that Northern Ireland was and would remain part of the United Kingdom; would accept a Stormont Government elected by majority vote (ie not power sharing, which it seemed clear had no future) and would participate in the political structures created for this purpose; and whereby the British Government in return would agree to participation by the Garda (and possibly the Irish Army) in security operations in the North (especially in the Catholic areas), and would be willing in some way to associate members of the Irish judiciary with the judicial process in the North. Mr Lillis thought or hoped (it was not clear which) that the Forum for a New Ireland would come up inter alia with something along these lines.

5. Mr Goodall made it clear that he could offer no considered or informed comment on these ideas but would ensure that those responsible in London were aware that the Irish Government's mind was moving in this direction. Speaking personally, he recognised that from an Irish perspective acceptance of majority rule in the North and formal acknowledgement that the North was and would remain part of the United Kingdom would constitute an important shift in the position of the Irish Government and the SDLP. But

from a British perspective many people would feel that Mr Lillis's approach amounted to an invitation to the United Kingdom to make a major political concession in return for something which we already had. The use of the Garda on northern territory and anything approximating to an all-Irish judiciary were issues of the highest political sensitivity for the United Kingdom. It would therefore be quite wrong to encourage any optimism that the approach would appear attractive in London. Mr Goodall also questioned whether the Taoiseach, if indeed he decided to endorse the new approach, would be able to carry his own Party with him, let alone the Opposition. Mr Lillis said that the fact that it was the SDLP which would be pushing these ideas would to some extent spike the Opposition's guns, since even Mr Haughey could not afford to be seen to be responsible for torpedoing the SDLP and thereby letting in Sinn Fein.

6. Asked whether acceptance of the Union might not in fact discredit the SDLP in the eyes of its own constituents and open the way to a complete Sinn Fein take over of the minority, Mr Lillis said that the SDLP had weighed the risks and believed that an approach on the lines described would be warmly welcomed by the overwhelming majority of Northern Ireland Catholics. Mr John Hume personally was behind the approach and would no doubt be exploring it shortly with Northern Ireland Ministers. The SDLP judged that the paramount desire of the Roman Catholics in the North was for stability and order, and to be released from the grip of the PIRA who at present dominated and terrorised the Catholic ghettos. The PIRA could not be dislodged unless the minority were allowed to recover confidence in the official forces of law and order; and this could be achieved only by associating police and judges from the Republic with the security process. The restoration of stability in the North was so important to the Republic that he believed the Taoiseach would be prepared to pay the high political price for it which he had described.

7. Mr Lillis was also asked how an Irish Government would be able to reconcile its formal endorsement of Northern Ireland's position as part of the United Kingdom with the provision in the



Irish Constitution which described Irish territory as being the whole of the island of Ireland. He said that it might be necessary to amend the Irish Constitution in this respect, and that this possibility was not ruled out. But he explained that Article 2 of the Constitution was qualified by Article 3, which contained an explicit, albeit provisional, recognition of partition (a fact which he said was often overlooked in Ireland). It might be possible to build on this without needing to have recourse to a constitutional amendment.

8. In conclusion, Mr Lillis emphasised that the Irish were not in a hurry; they did not want to prejudice any chance of success there might be for their ideas by pushing them too hard or too fast, and they were not looking for substantive discussion of them at the November Summit. But they did want the British Government to consider them very seriously.

9. Meanwhile the broad lines of the new Irish approach have begun to appear in the British press, notably in leading articles in The Guardian of 12 September (which Mr Lillis has said was based on a conversation between the Assistant Editor and the Taoiseach), in The Times of 19 September and in the Financial Times of 20 September; and also in an article by Mary Holland in the New Statesman of 16 September. Copies of these are attached. A clear pointer in the same direction was given in the speech of the Irish Minister for Justice, Mr Michael Noonan, at the British-Irish Association conference in Oxford on 17 September, of which I attach the concluding passage. Some of these articles (but significantly not that in The Guardian) suggest that the Irish are thinking in terms of joint sovereignty: but Mr Lillis made it clear that the Taoiseach was in fact prepared to contemplate formal acceptance of the Union, and this point is made in the last sentence of The Guardian piece.

10. On the face of things it is difficult to be other than profoundly sceptical about the proposition that appears to be being advanced; and, if one is profoundly sceptical, one questions both the validity (or at any rate the completeness) of the proposition and the motives for which it was being advanced. If the Taoiseach



and the SDLP were really prepared to contemplate formal acceptance of the Union, and the SDLP were really prepared to accept a majority-elected Stormont Government without "power-sharing", it would be (from the British point of view) a tremendous political advance. But can they be so? Could any Taoiseach, let alone the Taoiseach of a coalition Government with a small majority in the Dail, so abandon or water down the commitment to Irish unity without destroying himself (and his party) politically? Would such a commitment last any longer than the Taoiseach who made it? Or is this Taoiseach in reality thinking merely of reviving something like the formula which Mr Cosgrave and he accepted at Sunningdale and which acknowledged that union would not come about without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland? Can the SDLP abandon the commitment to power-sharing, which has hitherto been an apparently indispensable plank in their platform, without destroying the credibility of their claim to represent the nationalist minority in the North and giving the game to the Provisional Sinn Fein? Can it really be right that the desire of the nationalist minority for peace and stability is so great as to override their will to pursue the political aims with which they have been imbued for so long? Is the main motive to draw the British Government into discussion of, and even negotiation about, some "all-Irish" element in the law and order system in Northern Ireland? We cannot be sure that what Mr Goodall is getting from Mr Lillis is a true and complete picture of what is in the minds and intentions of the Irish Government.

11. The approach as presented would appear to call for a high degree of political adroitness in Dr FitzGerald and the SDLP, if they are to sell it to their publics. But it could be politically maladroit for the British Government to turn it down out of hand, and refuse even to look at it. British political and public opinion could see some attraction in a package which appeared to include formal Irish acceptance of the union, and some sharing of the burden of sustaining the security effort with the Irish Government. The package could be designed, and would no doubt be presented, in such a way as not merely to appeal to reasonable



opinion in the North and in the United Kingdom but also to strengthen the Irish Government's position with the United States and other friendly Governments. It could be damaging if the United Kingdom were presented as having refused even to explore an approach which, on the face of it, goes further than any Irish Government has ever done to meet Unionist concerns. And indeed, even if the proposition as presented seems unrealistic and unacceptable, it is entirely possible that a process of skilful negotiation could enable it to be developed into a package which produced significant advantage. Such a process would be delicate and long drawn-out; but that is not necessarily an overriding obstacle at the beginning of a new Parliament here, when the Governments in London and Dublin can both look forward to a period of some years in office without national elections.

12. If this is right, we could respond at this stage without commitment, by continuing to express scepticism about the viability of the Irish ideas while at the same time probing them on some of the unanswered questions. How, for example, would the Irish Government's acceptance of the Union be expressed? What guarantee could there be that a future Irish Government would not reverse it? How far reaching are the proposals on security? Is Dr FitzGerald simply reverting to his earlier ideas for an all-Ireland Police Force and an all-Ireland judiciary? Would the arrangements be reciprocal - eg would members of the RUC have the right to patrol in the Republic and Northern judges to sit in Dublin? What sort of Stormont Government do the Irish have in mind? What political institutions and structures would include and provide a role for the SDLP? There will be a number of opportunities over the next few weeks for exploring such questions without commitment, notably when the SDLP make their predicted approach to Northern Ireland Ministers, and in the course of the further official contacts between British and Irish officials which are due to take place in the run up to the Summit (the next of which is scheduled for 28 September).



13. You will want to consider the implications of all this before deciding what line we should take with the Irish. Meanwhile I am sending copies of this minute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of the letters 'R' and 'A' in a stylized, cursive script.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

21 September 1983