

Prime Minute

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PRIME MINISTER

We will explore further - but A.S.C. 3/10.  
no good will come of it - without having now read it - several times -

Anglo-Irish Relations: Northern Ireland

I believe the risk of work violence is very high

Following our discussion on 21 September of the new ideas being floated by the Irish on Northern Ireland, you asked for a report on Mr Goodall's next talk on the subject with the Irish and, in the light of that report, for a further assessment of the implications of the Irish ideas (Mr Coles's minute to me of 22 September).

2. Mr Goodall saw his Irish opposite number, Mr Lillis, in Dublin on 28 September and his report is attached.

3. The line taken by Mr Lillis in this latest conversation leaves little room for doubt that he is in fact speaking with the personal backing of the Taoiseach; and that we are faced with a serious, if still highly tentative, approach from Dr FitzGerald aimed at bringing about a major change in the terms in which both the Republic and the British Government have up to now approached the problem of Northern Ireland. It is confirmed that the central element in this approach would be a bargain whereby the Irish Government and the SDLP would commit themselves to acceptance of Northern Ireland being part of the United Kingdom (if necessary with an amendment to the Irish constitution to this effect) in return for participation by Irish security forces in operations north of the border and the association of Irish judges with the judicial processes in Northern Ireland.

What happens if one of them is shot by a Unionist (see military journal)

4. The SDLP's attitude to this approach (which is crucial to its credibility) remains to be tested: but Mr Lillis continues to maintain that Mr John Hume is behind it and will shortly be making this clear to Mr Prior. What is also still unclear is how far Dr FitzGerald has taken his own Cabinet colleagues into his confidence; and to what extent if any he has wider political backing for his offer to move beyond the concept of joint sovereignty to an entrenched recognition of the Union. It must be very much an open question whether he could carry Mr Haughey





and Fianna Fail with him or whether the package would enable the SDLP to survive electorally against Sinn Fein. But the possibility of amending the present Irish constitution to change the territorial claim into a long-term aspiration is not a new idea in Irish politics (indeed it has a long history); and if skilfully presented to the Irish electorate it could command wide support (as well as arousing fierce opposition from extreme nationalists). The fact that Dr FitzGerald is apparently thinking of proceeding in stages, using the Forum to prepare the ground, lends additional credibility to his approach. So whatever scepticism we may feel about his chances of success, we cannot afford to discount them altogether.

5. The price which the Irish would be demanding from the United Kingdom in return is high, and it remains to be determined whether we might be willing - or able - to meet it. But the advantages for Britain of securing from the Republic and the SDLP a formal and durable recognition of the Union would be substantial. If the border ceased for the foreseeable future to be a political issue in relations between the two countries and between the two main political forces in the North, one of the main justifications for Unionist fears and resentment would have been removed. This could lead to a fundamental change of attitudes for the better. Moreover even if the full package outlined by Mr Lillis could not in the end be delivered, discussion of the package could provide opportunities for us to negotiate changes which would be to our positive advantage: for instance, in relations between the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Gardan Siochana.

*Doubtful if the IR would be over more a time.*

6. For the moment the ball is in the Irish court. They have asked for and been given a preliminary British reaction to their ideas and it is now up to them to pursue them. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will (I understand) be seeing both Mr Hume and the Irish Foreign Minister, Mr Barry, within the next month; and the Taoiseach may raise the subject with you at the Summit on 7 November. The Irish thus have ample opportunity over the next few weeks to confirm the seriousness of their





intentions and make their thinking known at the highest level. Meanwhile we need to consider urgently how we should respond if the Irish put forward firm proposals on the lines indicated by Mr Lillis, and what our public line should be, once these ideas start to attract Parliamentary and press interest.

7. The first step must clearly be to reach a considered assessment of the Irish initiative and its likely implications, which you could use as a basis for discussion with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I would proposed to put this in hand as a matter of urgency, involving only a very small group of senior officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Northern Ireland Office and the Cabinet Office. The ground to be covered would include the political background to the Irish initiative, the motivation underlying it and the reaction it might be expected to evoke from the political parties and public opinion generally inside the Republic. At the same time it will be necessary for the Northern Ireland Office to consider the likely impact in Northern Ireland of the approach proposed; to identify the constitutional, legal and practical difficulties which would be involved in associating Irish security forces and judges with the maintenance of law and order in Northern Ireland; and to examine the extent to which it might be possible to accommodate Irish ideas on these points, assuming that the Irish Government (and the SDLP) were able and willing to deliver their side of the bargain. I should be glad to know if you are content for us to proceed on this basis.

8. I am sending copies of this minute for their personal information to the Secretaries of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and for Northern Ireland.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

3 October 1983