

BRITISH EMBASSY,  
DUBLIN.

13 December 1983

THE IRISH QUESTION: FIRST IMPRESSIONS FROM THE REPUBLIC  
OF IRELAND

SUMMARY

1. HM Ambassador offers an impressionistic account of attitudes in the Irish Republic towards Northern Ireland and of the possible recommendations of the Forum for a New Ireland (paragraphs 1 and 2).
2. Many in the South want to have nothing to do with the North. In a recent public opinion survey 64% said unity would not take place within fifty years, if at all. But there is a basic nationalism which is easily aroused. The nationalist myths place all the responsibility on Britain. The Taoiseach designed the Forum for a New Ireland to reduce belief in these myths, but though it will re-examine them it will not repudiate them entirely (paragraphs 3-10).
3. The Unionist position is not generally understood. The Northern Catholics are seen as victims and the consequent tensions are seen as bound to lead to violence. This means a public tolerance of Sinn Fein which alarms the Irish Government. The SDLP is not seen as effective (paragraphs 11-13).
4. The Taoiseach and his friends see the first key to progress as lying with the British Government. They are concerned about the alienation of the minority in the North. They mean a number of things:
  - (a) the loss of votes by the SDLP; there are various not very satisfactory ways of trying to help them;
  - (b) the alienation of the SDLP from the institutions of government in the North; the future of the Assembly is now in doubt;
  - (c) the refusal of the Catholic population in the North to accept the legitimacy of the institutions of law and order; the Irish see a need to provide security forces with a new legitimacy (paragraphs 14-23)



5. This new legitimacy could, they think, be conferred by proposals for joint sovereignty or joint authority. They are also considering proposals for a federation, or a confederation (paragraphs 24-27).

6. Repartition or other demographic solutions would not meet their concerns (paragraph 28).

7. Dr FitzGerald and his friends do not know the answer to Ireland's problems. They hope the British will find it for them (paragraph 29).

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The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP  
Secretary of State for Foreign and  
Commonwealth Affairs

Sir,

THE IRISH QUESTION: FIRST IMPRESSIONS FROM THE REPUBLIC  
OF IRELAND

1. I have sent you no first impressions from Dublin till now. This unhappy island's problems are complex enough to defy superficial examination. Her Majesty's Ambassador in Dublin is so heavily protected from injury or insult that he is sometimes bound to feel the realities of Irish life to be very remote. Add to this the assurances I have received from a number of Irishmen that I must never believe what an Irishman says, and the logical confusion this engenders, and it is not surprising that I have hesitated to write to you. I will incorporate in my Annual Report a general view of the Republic as I have found it. But you may wish to have separately a first view of the attitudes in the South towards Northern Ireland: of the prejudices and aspirations which history has formed here: and of the ways in which people here might seek to satisfy them. This is the material of which murder is made, and I must confront it.

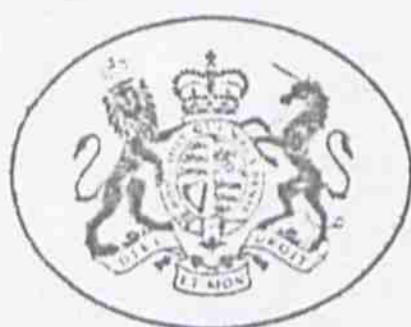
2. Since the Forum for a New Ireland is likely to publish its report within the next couple of months or so, it may also be of use for me to survey briefly the kind of things which may appear in it. We shall not be able to avoid comment on it; we ought to prepare our minds now. I will consider this later in this despatch.

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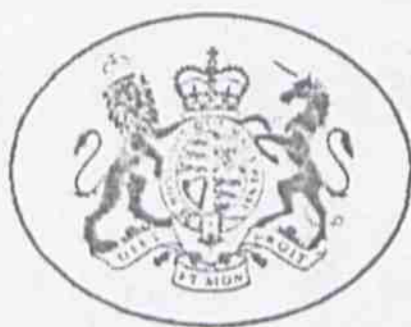
3. First, many people in Southern Ireland often seem as if they want to have nothing to do with the North. De Valera's ideal was a self-sufficient Gaelic Catholic rural Ireland. The Irish have often felt they must keep themselves untouched by the real world outside and by the twentieth century. It is not only that their ideals have little to do with material progress. The triumph of Irish separatism was not a liberal triumph. There is much hypocrisy, particularly about religion and family matters and particularly about Ireland. It often seems a country of obscurantists who are afraid of the North not only because of the violence but because of the contamination of Protestantism and the influence of British contemporary society. Many Irish are reluctant to face the fact that they cannot escape that influence, any more than the British can escape the cultural influence of the United States. Dublin and its surroundings hold one-third of the population. Though largely Catholic, they are now somewhat less assiduous churchgoers than they were, they are not Gaelic speaking, they are not rural, and they are not self-sufficient. But for many of them the image of Ireland they have grown up with is still one of 26 cosy counties, whose whole way of life could be totally disrupted by the Northerners. They don't even care for the Northern Catholics, who may have been victimized by the British, but have still adopted a number of foreign ways. Very few travel North, except for crossborder shopping, which is profitable, and the occasional sporting or business trip. A substantial number believe the economic cost of unity would be unacceptable. A substantial number do not believe that Irish unity is anything but a figment of politicians' fantasy. In a recent survey of public opinion 64% said unity would not take place within the next fifty years, if at all. This is a figure to be borne in mind in reading the rest of this despatch. The difficulty in taking account of it is that this majority is silent in public. It is the rest who make the political speeches.



4. Many in the South quite naturally also want to avoid thinking about Northern Ireland because it is distasteful. People in Britain also surely find Northern Ireland too painful and disagreeable to contemplate. It is easy to decide that it is all so awful and there is nothing to be done about it, so that the best thing is to get on with one's own affairs.

5. Neither this distrust nor this distaste however is more than superficial. Underneath there is a basic nationalism about being Irish, among the most sophisticated as well as the least. It is this feeling which has drawn the whole of the South together in anger against the British at regular intervals and which inspires a feeling of solidarity with Northern Catholics against Britain after each new horror for which Britain is held responsible, whether it is Bloody Sunday or the suicides in the H-blocks. There is a raw nerve which never sleeps.

6. When people in the South do think about the North, I believe their principal reaction is to blame the British for what is going on there. Of course, the inclination to blame the British for one's misfortunes is not exclusively Irish. But perhaps the Irish have more reason. The British planted the settlers, the British persecuted the Catholics, the British let them die in the famine, and the British legislated for partition. The British are seen by the Irish as historically responsible for the difficulties the North is in now. Of course it is useless to deplore the events of the past, as the Irish do continually. We have to deal with the present problems. We shall not, however, understand Irish views and Irish sensitivities without a feeling for and some knowledge of the past. For them it is a continuous tragic presence. Perhaps it is one of the burdens of the Celt that he naturally sees history in terms of defeat.



7. There are other things for which Britain is blamed which I do not think reasonable. One of them is the belief that we deliberately foment the troubles in the North in order to ensure that Northern Ireland remains British territory available to NATO, as if a province in turmoil was very much use. Another variant of this is that we are trying to pressurize the Republic into joining NATO, as if we thought their armed forces significant. They even suppose we feel we need them in the Commonwealth, or indeed the United Kingdom. These are admittedly the fantasies of what are generally called opinion formers - journalists, politicians, academics - not of the average Irishman of no opinion, but they affect speculation about the future. Mr Haughey is clearly willing to trade Irish unification for Irish membership of NATO, as if, from the point of view of the Unionists, any more than the British, they could be weighed in the same scales.

8. The central myth about Britain and Northern Ireland, however, runs like this - and I am indebted to John Bowman's recent book on de Valera and the Ulster Question for the formulation. He says that the 1920's Irish nationalists presumed:

- (i) that the people of Ireland comprised one nation;
- (ii) that Britain had partitioned Ireland solely from self-interest;
- (iii) that an independent, politically 're-united' Ireland was inevitable;
- (iv) that even if Britain had to coerce the Ulster Unionists into unity - as she was, in honour, if necessary, bound to do - the resulting united Ireland would be economically prosperous and politically stable;
- (v) that if Britain unilaterally broke the link with Northern Ireland, the Ulster Unionists would be obliged to accept an accommodation with the south;
- (vi) that Britain had the necessary resources - military, economic, and political - to coerce the Unionists into accepting a united Ireland.

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This is what Fianna Fail preaches even now, although it is generally agreed that a united Ireland would require very substantial financial assistance from Britain for a long time. But that is not thought to be a worry, since Britain is seen as having the money and the moral obligation to provide it. And not merely Fianna Fail, many people of all parties think we have the duty and the means to push the Unionists into accepting Irish unity. An addition to this myth, espoused for instance by Cardinal O'Fiaich, is that because they are all Irish there would be no difficulties between Catholics and Protestants in getting together if only the British would leave, and that the Protestants only appear quarrelsome because the British make them so. These beliefs are sincerely held by people whose image of Ireland is at the same time, and incompatibly, that of a Roman Catholic paradise.

9. The Taoiseach himself has told me that when he set up the Forum for a New Ireland earlier this year one of his aims was to reduce belief in these nationalist myths. But a leading theorist of Fianna Fail has told me that there is no possibility of accepting a report by the Forum which abrogates the right of Ireland to unity. I take this to mean that the Taoiseach's aim will not succeed. The Report will express various points of view: one of them will be the assertion that these myths about what Britain can do and is bound to do need re-examination in the light of facts; another will reaffirm the myths.

10. Of course the Taoiseach and his party too will not abandon the formal aspirations to unity. Nor will they excuse Britain from blame. Sometimes they seem simply to be pursuing the same aims as Fianna Fail in a more half-hearted way. At others it seems as if they espouse unity by consent partly to protect themselves from early attainment of unity. The Civil War disagreements are still central to the differences between the parties here. That is one reason why Fine Gael are trying to look at the facts and to get others to look at them.



11. These facts include the views of the Unionists. It seems to me that the majority of people in the South, like Cardinal O'Fiaich, cannot imagine that the Unionists are afraid of the British Government letting them down, since it is axiomatic that the British are on their side. Equally, they cannot imagine that the Unionists are afraid of the South, since they see themselves as open-hearted and harmless people. They do not suppose that there are people in the world who are alarmed and offended by the dominance in the South of Roman Catholic ideas. Life in the Republic is filled with taboos and hang-ups other English-speaking people do not share. A number of people here even see Ulster Protestants as the enemies of true Irish religion just as some Protestants in the North see the Southern Catholics as agents of anti-Christ; however distasteful it may be, we have to accept that there is a sectarian as well as a political dimension. It is expressed at its worst in the motto 'Kill a Prodig for God'. That is the view of no more than a few in the South. But the Southerner in general sees the Ulster Protestants as people encouraged by the British to be aggressive. The Taoiseach and his friends know more about them than that. But even he is still inclined to think they can be charmed into some kind of unity. If the Irish Constitution were altered, if a more secular state were established, things would fall into place, he feels. They have aspirations which need satisfying, he would say, about The Queen, the Union Jack, the Commonwealth. This is no doubt true, but it seems to me that he attaches too much importance to such symbols and is mistaken in believing the Unionists can easily be satisfied with them.

12. And how are the Northern Catholics seen here? Of course, primarily, they are seen as the victims of British policy and Protestant brutality, denied civil rights in the past, still discriminated against and denied their aspirations now. Many feel that it is not surprising if the boys get a bit rough at times when they are provoked by the security forces. Of course people do not think that the violence in the North is no more than that. They recognize that dreadful things are done in the

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Catholics' name. But all the Northern Catholics are seen in the South as being denied their natural aspirations for the union of Ireland and the consequent tensions and frustration are seen as bound to lead to violence. All the Irish heroes of the past have been violent men and the use of force in the name of Ireland is hallowed by their memory. Of course, most of those who are unwilling entirely to reject the use of force would assert that force ought to be used only against the British army, whose brief image as the saviour of the Catholics from Protestant violence has faded, against the RUC, which is still mistrusted as an instrument of Protestant violence, and against Protestant para-militaries. Nearly all would say it is wrong to kill indiscriminately. But the activities of the IRA are widely seen as an inevitable response to an intolerable situation. There are Dublin pubs where men sing IRA songs and decent ordinary people put money in IRA collecting boxes. Even immediately after the killings at the gospel hall at Darkley 7% of the electorate - or over 2,000 people - in the Dublin Central constituency were willing to vote for Sinn Fein, the party of violence. I do not believe there is much instinctive horror of Sinn Fein outside sophisticated circles in the South any more than there is in a wide range of the Northern Catholics. It is this range of feelings that inspires in the Irish Government the fear that Sinn Fein are set, both in the North and in the South, to achieve further political advances. If Sinn Fein were to get only 51% of Catholic votes in the North, the Irish Government's position as the spokesman of those voters would be intolerable. They fear that Sinn Fein would then surge forward in the Republic and they know Sinn Fein's aim is destabilization. There would be the danger of a successful electoral campaign in the South based on the Republican border counties and deprived inner city areas. But there would, too, be the danger of a general radicalisation of public opinion in the South similar to what was seen for a time during the 1981 hunger strike. Sinn Fein would be well placed to heighten tension in the North and to benefit from the accentuation of

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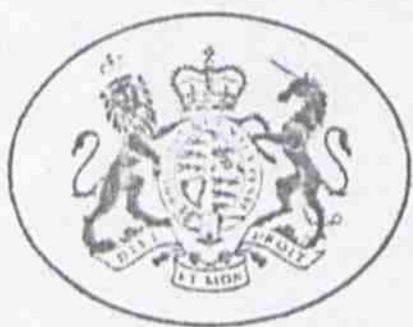


Anglophobia here. The Irish Government would be forced to trim its policy towards Britain accordingly. Fianna Fail, which prides itself on offering a constitutional alternative to Sinn Fein, would no doubt lurch even further in the same direction, and intimidation, never far from the surface in Ireland, would begin to affect leaders of opinion.

13. But for the time being the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) can be sustained as the legitimate voice of Northern Catholics, though its electoral failures, given that it is manifestly ineffective, are not seen as surprising. The Forum for a New Ireland has been set up partly as a platform for the SDLP and the Irish parties have so far been content to allow the SDLP leaders to make the running in the Forum. But it is uncertain whether the final report will reflect their preoccupations; it is much more likely that at that stage the historic attitudes of the Southern parties will dominate the Forum's deliberations.

14. So far I have been trying to convey feelings and report the prejudices revealed in a superficial contact with the Irish scene. I ought to try to complement these with some suggestions about the kind of policies they may engender. I ought to offer a more precise forecast about the content of the report of the Forum. I ought, despite the difficulty of such an analysis, to say how I think the Taoiseach and his friends, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr John Hume, and others, -- lumbered as they are with this background of prejudice themselves and hampered in their freedom of action by the existence of these prejudices among the electorate, approach the problems of Northern Ireland and of their solution.

15. First, they cannot avoid including the early unification of Ireland among their stated aims. The nationalist myths still impose certain slogans and though they have the intelligence to regard them sceptically they cannot reject completely the aspirations on which they were brought up. They freely  
(acknowledge



acknowledge that it cannot all be achieved at once and without qualification. They know that neither their own electorate nor that of the North is ready for that. But the immediate incorporation of the North into some kind of Irish unity will have to figure among the demands to be put to the British.

They have said over and over again (notably in Mr Hume's paper of last August for the Forum) that the first key to progress lies with the British, not the Unionists, and by that they mean the British Government. Although, like all other Irish constitutional parties, they affirm their devotion to the proposal that there should be no change without consent, like all other Irish constitutional parties they are to some extent equivocal about it, that is, uncertain at times about whose consent they are talking about. It has been suggested, for instance, that the votes of a majority of United Kingdom electors would suffice, and that the British would certainly vote to get rid of the Ulstermen. There is a body of opinion which does not rule out the possibility of a switch of British policy on these lines.

16. The most immediate problem as they see it is described nowadays in Dublin as the alienation of the minority in the North. The term has become fashionable and like most fashionable words it has lost precision. I think they mean a number of things.

17. They are particularly worried that Sinn Fein are gaining votes and the SDLP are losing them. It is said that the Catholic electorate are being alienated from the constitutional party which represents their interests. (It may seem strange to describe as constitutional a party which ignores the Assembly and whose leaders spend much of their time in Dublin and not in the North. But the term is not intended to mean more than that they oppose the use of force.) What the Taoiseach and his friends want is for HMG to make the SDLP attractive to the voter. One suggestion sometimes heard is that HMG should provide

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more money in a manner in which the SDLP were clearly seen to have the spending of it. The best way, however, would be to give some expression, not at present available, to the 'Irish dimension'. And what would that be?

18. One answer is the parliamentary tier which was contemplated at the Anglo-Irish Summits of December 1980 and November 1981 but which we have taken no steps to establish. A tier which consisted exclusively of members of the Dail, of the Opposition at Westminster, and of the SDLP would certainly not be very impressive. There are in any case certain doctrinal difficulties for the Irish about the inclusion of Northern Ireland representatives. Dr FitzGerald no doubt recognizes all this but does not see why he should not press the British Government on the point.

19. The Irish dimension could also be expressed in the North by such things as the wide use of the Irish flag, greater recognition of the Irish language, and the promotion of Irish culture. But it is difficult to believe that these would in themselves have any decisive effect on Nationalist opinion, in contrast to the trouble they would cause with the Unionists.

20. Other embodiments of the Irish dimension correspond to other definitions of alienation. It has been said that the SDLP is alienated from the institutions of government in the North and particularly from the Assembly. Sometimes it has seemed that Dr FitzGerald saw advantage in the SDLP's joining the Assembly and snatching as much power as Her Majesty's Government was willing to offer, which at the least appeared to be some kind of veto. But the veto has not been seen as enough to justify going back on their refusal to participate; some further gesture was required. Now the Irish regard the future of the Assembly as very doubtful; and some are delighted.



21. What might help the SDLP would be some kind of welcome by HMG for the report of the Forum. Helping the SDLP was certainly an important motive in the establishment of the Forum. It was presumably thought to add to their weight to be seen to be debating on equal terms with Irish parties. If therefore we were seen to be taking the report of the Forum seriously it could be maintained that we were taking the SDLP seriously. But the Irish have at present not much better an idea than we of what the report of the Forum will be. As I have already suggested, I believe that it will say 'Some thought this ..... Some thought that .....'. I see little reason why HMG should not welcome a report which contains an account of Unionist opposition to Southern aspirations. We could acknowledge it as an account of current thinking though not necessarily as a guide to policy. But I do not see how it would help the SDLP much for the British to say they are glad the Forum has recognized the importance of the Unionists.

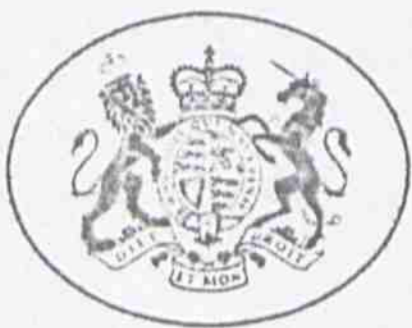
22. A different definition of alienation is the refusal of the Catholic population in the North to accept the legitimacy of the institutions of law and order. I understand that in Belfast this problem is thought to be exaggerated. The Irish in the South say that this is not what the SDLP tell them, and I think that we must accept that what the SDLP say is what the Irish Government perceives as the truth. Just as we are arguing with the Irish on the basis of very different prejudices, so we argue on different data. We affirm that the RUC have abandoned the practices which made Castlereagh an infamous name in the South. We say that members of the security forces are always put on trial if they appear to have performed illegal acts. We say the supergrass system is just. The Irish dispute this. The Irish Government certainly believe the British army, the RUC, and UDR, and to some extent, the courts, the prisons, and the judiciary to have lost the confidence of the minority, so that they lack the bases of law and order which are the bases of civilization. The Catholics will neither respect nor obey the security forces.



23. Stemming from this premiss is the thought that the minority must be given security forces with a new legitimacy. This legitimacy could be derived from their composition or from the authority controlling them. The Irish do not suppose that the RUC could recruit enough Catholics to patrol their own areas under the central authority of the RUC. They do not see HMG as able to gain sufficient confidence from the Catholics to be able to form a separate Northern Catholic security force. The only alternative way to provide one would be to use the Garda. This, therefore, would be an Irish answer. But under whose authority would the Garda work? They cannot operate in Northern Ireland without political control, and it is unthinkable in terms of Dublin politics that they should be placed under a British Secretary of State. (The Irish do not appear to have observed that whatever authority the Garda might work under they would be bound to be in cooperation, to begin with at any rate, with the British establishment, and if the Garda become associated with the British establishment they would automatically lose some legitimacy, in the South as well as in the North.) The main answer, they feel, is that the Irish Government should acquire some authority in the North.

24. This line of argument quickly reaches a proposal for joint sovereignty. Dr FitzGerald has been at pains to deplore the publicity given to this idea. It answers the question about the legitimacy of the Garda. But it answers too many other Irish aspirations as well for the British to be faced with it without careful preparation. However many Irish aspirations it might meet it would certainly arouse the opposition of the Unionists. But Dr FitzGerald sees the solution to the problems of the Catholics and the Unionists alike in the reconciliation of two identities. He seeks a formula in which each community can have its own rights and its own identities and can express its loyalty both in a different direction and in the same. From his point of view, it would not save him from accusations of compromise, of acquiescing in continued British sovereignty

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over the North. But in establishing Irish sovereignty as well in the North he would have achieved what all his predecessors failed to gain. The trouble is that joint sovereignty is the most elusive and impractical of concepts. This does not matter to the Irish. It is their habit to look for a commitment in principle, leaving the details to be looked at later. They would not understand us if we said that the value of a proposal could only be judged if its details were known. They might agree that a system of joint sovereignty might well lead to disagreements between the joint sovereigns. The Irish might think it worth the disagreements. But they might acknowledge that the prospect of the problems of exercising sovereignty together is not calculated to make the idea attractive to the British.

25. Perhaps in consequence we are now hearing talk from the Irish side on the theme of joint authority. It seems to me that it must have less attraction for them and no more for us. It would not dilute the concept of sovereignty but it would certainly dilute its exercise, without bringing any compensating practical advantage.

26. Another panacea which the Forum is examining is federation. A federation of North and South has much to commend it from the point of view of Fine Gael. It would establish Irish sovereignty, satisfying the major Irish aspiration, without making Dublin responsible for the details of government in the North. It is not clear however whether they see that the problems of devolution which affect Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom would be at least as severe if Northern Ireland were part of the Republic. How would it be governed on democratic principles? Would it not be in continual danger of secession? How would the Catholic minority fare? These questions would be raised by those who would regard federation as a continued betrayal of Irish unity.



27. Confederation is also mentioned as a Forum option. If it means the same as federation, only less of it, then the same questions arise, only more acutely. But there is another version which the Forum has not ignored. It is known by the acronym IONA (Islands of the North Atlantic); it would be a confederation of Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, probably under The Queen. The independence of a united Ireland under the British Crown was a dream in the past which one would have thought past for ever. But the Irish are capable of living in the past, and their views of Britain can be very ambivalent.

28. There are a few options more, which I must deal with even more summarily. One is repartition. It is said that Catholics are now in a majority West of the Bann. I doubt whether this would satisfy anyone in Dublin unless it were explicitly an interim measure leading to further changes. It would meet no Irish aspiration except helping some of the Catholics. It would not help the Catholics of West Belfast and it would land the Irish with some very indigestible Protestants, notably in Londonderry. Another solution is population transfer. The only form of this which they could be prepared to contemplate would be the expulsion of one million Protestants. Although de Valera toyed with this idea at one stage I think Dr FitzGerald too decent to regard it as feasible. The third is waiting for demographic change. They are confident that the Catholics will be prolific and will swamp the Protestants in due course; they do not believe Northern Ireland actuaries who say it will take sixty years. But they do not have the patience to wait and see whether the British Government will then stick to its principle of majority rule. After all, we drew the borders of Northern Ireland in order to protect the Protestants. They fear we would change the borders if necessary to perpetuate Protestant rule and put Irish unity further off; that would be the effect of repartition. In any case, they dare not wait very long while the Sinn Fein tide is rising to flood the barriers of democracy.



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29. So, as people in the Republic contemplate the problems of Northern Ireland, Dr FitzGerald and his friends are feeling desperate. They see no obvious answer to Ireland's problems. But precisely because the Unionists are so intransigent, the logic of the nationalist myths is that only Britain can produce the basis for a solution, by withdrawing the guarantee and obliging the Unionists to reach an agreement with the South. If only - the reasoning goes - HMG were more interested. If only the British knew more about Ireland. Then perhaps the British could find the solution itself. They think that if they press us hard enough - and they don't even know how to do that - we shall tell them what the answer is. I do not believe that we know what the answer is either.

30. I am sending copies of this despatch to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Secretary to the Cabinet, HM Ambassadors in Washington and to the Holy See and HM Consul-General, New York.

I am Sir  
Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Lord Avon'.

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