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bcc: Mr Goodall

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10 DOWNING STREET

*From the Private Secretary*

30 April, 1984

The Prime Minister has now seen your Secretary of State's minute of 26 April about the Report of the New Ireland Forum. She has also seen Mr. Goodall's minute of 27 April as well as the letter from Dr. FitzGerald which arrived here on 28 April. Mrs. Thatcher has noted your Secretary of State's comments on the preliminary version of the Report and has agreed to Mr. Goodall's proposal that consultations on our response to the Report should be undertaken on the basis of an analysis by the same small group of senior officials as were involved in preparing the content of Sir Robert Armstrong's approach to Mr. Nally on 1 March.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Roger Bone (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

TIMOTHY FLESHER

John Lyon, Esq.,  
Northern Ireland Office

SECRET

PRIME MINISTER

Anglo-Irish Relations: Forum Report

(attached) In his minute to you of 26 April, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland commented on a copy of a draft of the Report of the "Forum for a New Ireland" which our Ambassador in Dublin was given on a personal basis just before Easter. Mr Prior draws attention to the tendentious and one-sided nature of much of the draft, and suggests what might be the general lines of the Government's public response.

2. I have not been able to consult Sir Robert Armstrong, but I do not think that we would have anything at this stage to add to Mr Prior's comments on the substance of the draft report: clearly, Dr FitzGerald is having to pay a heavy price for Mr Haughey's endorsement, and the text which is emerging is drafted with at least as much of an eye to Irish domestic political infighting as to its impact on opinion in the United Kingdom. This is disappointing but perhaps hardly surprising.

3. While it seems unlikely that the final version of the report (which the Taoiseach now expects to be published in Dublin next Wednesday, 2 May) will differ very substantially from the text attached to Mr Prior's minute, it is important to bear in mind that that text (which contains alternative wordings on a number of points) is not final, and that a number of changes, some of which may be significant, will certainly be made in the course of the bargaining which is still going on between the four Irish party leaders. We also have confirmation from the Irish Embassy that it is the Taoiseach's intention to send you a later (but still not absolutely final) version of the text over the weekend, under cover of a personal letter putting his own interpretation on the report and inviting your attention to those elements in it on which he hopes that the British Government will concentrate. I think, therefore, that it would be wise to await the Taoiseach's text and covering message before seeking to arrive at a definitive judgment on the report and how we handle it.

4. The appearance of the report and the Government's response to it will also have an important bearing on the outcome of the confidential approach which Sir Robert Armstrong made on the Cabinet's instructions to the Secretary of the Irish Government on 1 March. Mr Lillis has told us that this approach is under intensive study in Dublin and that the Taoiseach's considered response to it will be conveyed to us in the week beginning 8 May. Although he was not able to indicate what that response would contain, Mr Lillis made it clear that the Taoiseach wants it to be in terms which are regarded as a serious effort on his part to take account of our ideas. This is, I think, an additional reason why our public handling of the Forum Report will, as the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland indicates, need to be very carefully weighed. I think therefore that in noting Mr Prior's intention to consult the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary about the precise terms of our immediate response to the Forum Report, you may wish to ask for this to be done on the basis of an analysis by the same small group of senior officials as were involved in preparing the content of Sir Robert's approach to Mr Nally on 1 March. Sir Robert Armstrong proposes to convene a meeting of this group on Monday afternoon, 30 April.

5. On a separate point, I understand that your office expects press questions during or after the weekend, asking whether you have in fact received an advance copy of the Report from the Taoiseach. We have established through Her Majesty's Ambassador at Dublin that the Taoiseach is very anxious that we should on no account disclose that he has passed an advance copy to you, not least because he will be doing so without the knowledge or agreement of the other party leaders participating in the Forum. He hopes therefore that it will be possible for us to deny having received an advance copy and believes that it should be possible to do this in good faith since the version he sends you will still have to be approved by a plenary meeting of the Forum at present due to be held on Monday, 30 April, and will not therefore be the absolutely final text. However negatively we may view the content of the report, I think it is right that we should do our best to respect the Taoiseach's wishes in this respect.

6. In Sir Robert's absence, I am sending copies of this minute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

*David Goodall*

A D S GOODALL

27 April 1984

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Prime Minister (4)

PRIME MINISTER

Content with this approach, on the basis that you will be consulted again before any definitive response is made?

NEW IRELAND FORUM

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26/4

The report of the New Ireland Forum is expected to be published on 2 May. We believe that the Taoiseach will launch it at a Press Conference, and he intends to send you an advance copy within the next few days.

2. Our Ambassador in Dublin has meanwhile obtained a copy of the nearly final text (annexed) on the understanding that we do not reveal in any way that we have seen it. Despite the uncertainties attaching to some passages we can form a pretty clear assessment of the report and can consider our initial public response to it. I thought you might wish to have my early views.

3. The report is disappointing. The Forum has been hailed as an opportunity for nationalists to examine their position, to demonstrate understanding of unionists, and to point to a way ahead in which different traditions in Ireland could be brought to live together constructively. If this analysis was ever correct, the opportunity has been missed. The report is rhetorical and thin on practicalities. "Green" passages were to be expected but I had hoped that they might be balanced by a clear recognition of the obstacles to achieving Irish unity and of the true feelings of unionists. This balance has not been achieved. There is little evidence of a year's hard thought. We had hoped for signs of FitzGerald's new thinking, perhaps restrained by Haughey, but the substance of the Report is in the Fianna Fail tradition, with some modification of the phrasing and presentation.

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4. There are, nevertheless, elements in the report which show some movement of nationalist opinion. They include the recognition that the Southern state would have to change if it was ever to accommodate the Unionist tradition; an acceptance of the Unionists' British identity; and a cross-party consensus (though expressed in ambiguous language) that Irish unity would have to be achieved "by agreement". And the Forum's condemnation of violence is unequivocal and can be welcomed. So too can the willingness of its participants to discuss ideas for the future other than those set out.

5. That said, the report has several major failings:-

- (i) there is no unequivocal statement that unity would come about only with the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. There is much emphasis on the need for Unionist participation in devising the structures of unity but no clear reaffirmation that the principle as well as the terms of unity require consent by such a majority. The report fails to face up to the fact that the Unionists simply do not want a united Ireland. It assumes that in some way they can be brought to find it acceptable. There is no hope of this for the foreseeable future.
- (ii) much is made of the urgency of the crisis in Northern Ireland, the depth of nationalist alienation, and the seriousness of the economic and security situation. There is much in this. But, following some rather tendentious history, the conclusion is drawn that the British Government is to blame and that it must now act vigorously to help initiate a process leading to reconciliation of the two traditions in a united Ireland or through joint sovereignty (called joint authority) over Northern Ireland.

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- (iii) the report says little or nothing to acknowledge the efforts which British governments have made to provide fair and stable government under direct rule. We are accused of providing only "crisis management".

In this kind of way major questions are begged and assumptions are built in which do not stand up. There is also little self-criticism, and little willingness to face up to the economic and political consequences of unity (even with consent) for the present Republic.

6. It will be difficult for us to respond positively to a report of this sort, and yet if we do not do so we shall no doubt be accused in Dublin and elsewhere of missing an opportunity and shall be blamed for all that goes wrong in Northern Ireland thereafter. And the Unionists will not doubt accuse us of betrayal if we do not reject the whole document out of hand.

7. I will consider with Geoffrey Howe the precise terms of our immediate response. It will need to take account of our long term relations with the Irish, the future of the SDLP, and American opinion in an election year. The Irish have made clear that in the first instance they do not hope for more than an indication that we are studying the report with some openness of mind. Had the report been better balanced it would have been relatively easy to refrain from saying much at this stage, building on your comments after last November's summit. The framing of the report in terms of a challenge to the British Government makes a more substantial response necessary. Otherwise nationalist expectations would be left at an absurdly unrealistic level and our supporters would be puzzled and suspicious. I therefore envisage drawing on the points in paragraphs 4 and 5 above in language which respects the efforts which the Forum participants have made but expresses disappointment at the unreality of its analysis and prescriptions.

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8. I am sending copies of this minute to Geoffrey Howe and Sir Robert Armstrong.

*J. M. Lyon*

J P

26 April 1984

(Approved by the Secretary of State  
and signed in his absence)