



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

25 November 1985

Dear Jim,

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH A DELEGATION FROM THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY AT 10 DOWNING STREET ON MONDAY 25 NOVEMBER

The Prime Minister met a delegation from the Northern Ireland Assembly this afternoon led by the Speaker of the Assembly, Mr. James Kilfedder MP. The delegation consisted of Mr. Peter Robinson MP and Mr. Allister from the Democratic Unionist Party; and Mr. Millar and Mr. Allen from the Ulster Unionist Party. The Northern Ireland Secretary was also present. The delegation put its case civilly and without ranting.

The Prime Minister said that she wished Unionist representatives to feel that they had ready access to Ministers. She was grateful for the prompt manner in which the Assembly had responded to her invitation to send a delegation. Mr. Kilfedder apologised for the absence of Alliance representatives. He understood that they were explaining their reasons directly to the Prime Minister. He then invited the representatives of the two Unionist parties to make statements.

Mr. Robinson recalled that, while the minority in Northern Ireland had been consulted about the Anglo-Irish Agreement, indeed given a seat on the fringes of the negotiating table, representatives of the majority had been excluded. It was hardly surprising that the terms of the Agreement had come as an unpleasant shock to them. The massive demonstration by Unionists in Belfast on 23 November had made their repudiation of the Agreement very clear. It had recorded a verdict of unyielding opposition. Unionists shared the objectives stated by the Prime Minister of peace, stability, reconciliation and co-operation. But they did not believe that they could be achieved through the

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Agreement. They could only be secured by bringing politicians in Northern Ireland together through the Assembly. The Unionists felt that they were being punished for their co-operation while the party which had thumbed its nose at the Assembly had been rewarded. The SDLP had achieved far more by withdrawing consent and refusing to participate in the Assembly than it ever could have done by co-operation. Mr. Robinson continued that it was unthinkable to have an agreement which affected the government of Northern Ireland without the consent of the Northern Ireland people to it. The Prime Minister had chided Mr. Scargill for not holding a ballot. Now the Unionists were entitled to say the same to her. The people of Northern Ireland were equal citizens of the United Kingdom and entitled to be governed in the same way as the rest of the United Kingdom. He wondered how the Prime Minister intended to make the Agreement work without the consent of the majority in Northern Ireland. He would say in conclusion that the present situation was the greatest constitutional crisis to face Northern Ireland this century. It was remarkable that there had been so little violence, thanks to the efforts of the leaders of the two Unionist parties to channel feelings into the institutional and democratic processes.

Mr. Millar recalled that the Prime Minister had once said that the people of Ulster were as British as the people of Finchley. If that was the case, they had the right to be governed in exactly the same way without the influence of a foreign power. If the Government proposed to govern Ulster separately then surely the arrangements must meet with the consent of the people to be governed. That consent did not exist. The Unionists bitterly resented their exclusion from consultation during the negotiation of the Agreement. Claims were already being made by politicians in the Republic that there were secret understandings to change the role and structure of the UDR and of the Northern Ireland judiciary. The Unionist parties had drawn up proposals for internal progress in Northern Ireland and had been keen to pursue them. The basic obstacle to progress was the boycott of the Northern Ireland Assembly by the SDLP. The Anglo-Irish Agreement would make it less not more likely that the SDLP would join in the political process. Nor would Sinn Fein's power be diminished. They were claiming the Agreement as a victory for IRA violence. Equally it was not realistic to expect any significant results from security co-operation with the Irish Republic. No Irish Government could survive politically if it took or defended the measures necessary to defeat terrorism. He therefore implored the Prime Minister to rethink and renegotiate the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

Mr. Allister said that the British Government had

always said that it would seek progress in Northern Ireland only in ways acceptable to the two communities. This had been confirmed in the Chequers communique. Yet now the Anglo-Irish Agreement proposed a new structure of government which amounted to radical change without the views of the majority community being sought. It had outraged every stratum of Unionist opinion. It was no good replacing alienation of the minority by alienation of the majority. The Agreement rewarded those who had obstructed political progress within Northern Ireland. It had also destroyed the confidence which Unionists had previously had in the Prime Minister.

Mr. Allen reiterated that the Agreement had destroyed the regard in which the Unionist community had traditionally held the Prime Minister. He feared that it would lead to more violence in Northern Ireland rather than a reduction in violence.

The Prime Minister recalled that at her press conference after the Chequers Summit she had made clear that there would be no federation, no joint sovereignty and no joint authority. The Agreement did not introduce any of these. The Chequers communique itself had indeed said that any arrangements for devolved government would need to be acceptable to both communities. But the Anglo-Irish Agreement proposed no particular structures for devolved government. Indeed the Agreement did not alter the structure of government or decision taking in Northern Ireland at all. There was no constitutional change. Decisions would remain with the United Kingdom Government. There was no case for a referendum. The members of the delegation had suggested that Unionists were excluded from consultation. But they already had a forum for making their views known in the Assembly, and of course through Unionist Members of the Westminster Parliament. The Anglo-Irish Agreement offered the Unionist community significant advantages: recognition of the status of Northern Ireland and the fact that the majority wished for no change; improved security co-operation which she believed would be forthcoming and which would be pursued vigorously through the Intergovernmental Conference; and a commitment to work for devolved government which, if fulfilled, would diminish the role of the Intergovernmental Conference. It was significant that the Irish Government was committed to work for devolution and thus in effect for a reduction in the role of the Conference. She wished to emphasise in particular that there were no secret side-agreements. The Prime Minister continued that the co-operation of the Nationalist community was needed if violence was to be defeated. She could not ignore the existence as British citizens of the minority in Northern Ireland. Nor could the Unionists ignore them. But a way had to be found to detach

them from the IRA. She recognised the Unionists' fear that the views of the Nationalist minority would be heard more than theirs. We were considering ways in which the Unionists' desire for consultation could be met. But the fact was that we did regularly hear the views of the Unionist majority already.

Mr. Robinson suggested there was a difference in the nature of consultation available to the Unionists through the Assembly and to the Nationalists from the Intergovernmental Conference. There was no obligation on the government to reach agreement with the Assembly. In the Intergovernmental Conference, on the other hand, the Government were committed to make determined efforts to reach agreement with the Republic. The Prime Minister said that this was not the case. We were committed to make determined efforts to resolve differences. If those efforts failed, we would decide. Nor was it true to say that the Agreement gave the Republic a right to be consulted. It recognised that the Republic could put forward views and proposals. That was a significant difference. Mr. Robinson asked whether the Prime Minister would say that the Agreement was more than consultative. The Prime Minister said that she would not choose any single word to characterise the Agreement. The key fact was that the Intergovernmental Conference had no executive authority and could not take decisions.

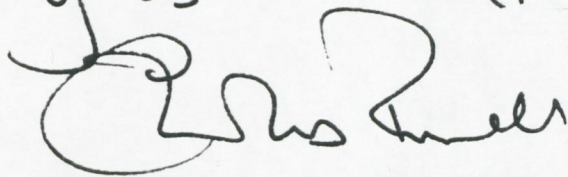
Mr. Millar said that the structure of the Intergovernmental Conference would offer a future British Government a mechanism to weaken Northern Ireland's links with the United Kingdom, indeed hand it over to the Republic. The Prime Minister said that, if any future British Government wished to do this, it would do it regardless of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Prime Minister continued that she was aware that the proposal which had featured at Sunningdale for a Council of Ireland was anathema to Unionists and she had gone out of her way to avoid any similar institution.

The Prime Minister asked whether the Unionist parties were specifically asking to have a mechanism by which they could feed in views on matters within the scope of the Intergovernmental Conference. Mr. Robinson and Mr. Millar denied this. The whole framework of the Intergovernmental Conference was anathema to them.

Mr. Robinson asked again whether the Prime Minister thought the Anglo-Irish Agreement could work without the consent of the majority in Northern Ireland. He recalled that Sunningdale had been accepted by Parliament but could not be made to work. The Prime Minister said that the Anglo-Irish Agreement was a modest and limited one. She was

amazed at the Unionist reaction. She would have thought that they would welcome a step whose main purpose was to defeat the men of violence. She hoped that people in Northern Ireland, as loyal citizens of the United Kingdom, would co-operate to defeat terrorism. She was not sure what withdrawal of consent meant and certainly could not see what useful purpose it would serve. From what she had heard it sounded likely to alienate many people in the rest of the United Kingdom and turn them against Northern Ireland. But to answer Mr. Robinson's question, the Government was determined to make the Agreement work.

I am sending copies of this letter to Len Appleyard (FCO) and Christopher Mallaby (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely,


(Charles Powell)

Jim Daniell, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.