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PRIME MINISTER

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Anglo-Irish Relations: Armstrong/Nally Meeting

As agreed when the Taoiseach telephoned you on 7 March, Mr Nally and I, supported by other officials, held a meeting in London on 10 March. The discussion was mainly about the questions raised with you by the Taoiseach on the telephone, the so-called Day of Action in Northern Ireland on 3 March and the policies the two Governments should adopt in the coming months.

2. We told the Irish in no uncertain terms that we had made no attempt to suggest to the United States Administration that the Taoiseach's current visit to Washington should be handled in a low-profile way. We explained to Mr Nally and his team that we had merely pointed out to the Americans, as we also had to the Irish, that it would be inappropriate for United States money for Northern Ireland as well as the Republic to be announced in the exclusively United States-Irish nationalist context of St Patrick's Day and the Taoiseach's visit.

3. We also pointed out, with regard to the highly misleading advertisement placed in the Belfast Newsletter on 7 March by Mr Molyneaux and Mr Paisley, that an article in the Belfast Telegraph the same evening had demolished the key arguments in the advertisement. The Irish Government will be now be aware that the Northern Ireland Police Authority have also published a notice effectively countering the advertisement placed by Mr Molyneaux and Mr Paisley.

4. In explaining the Government's present policy, I stressed that the Government's commitment to the Anglo-Irish Agreement remained absolutely unqualified and that you had made this clear

in your talks with Messrs Molyneaux and Paisley and with Mr Hume, Mr Kilfedder and Mr Cushnahan. I said that the furthest you had been willing to go with Messrs Molyneaux and Paisley had been to say that you would operate the Agreement sensitively.

5. Mr Nally and I agreed that the unionist community was very divided about its future course of action. Mr Nally found it difficult to judge whether the revulsion among many unionists against the more extreme tactics used on 3 March would cause a reduction in the support for hard men like Mr Robinson. Mr Nally commented that, if such a tendency existed, it might diminish as the weeks went by; but he and his colleagues were not inclined to see Mr Peter Robinson as a serious challenge to Mr Paisley's leadership of the Democratic Unionist Party. I said that our present assessment was that for us to call a Round Table Conference on devolution in the near future would be premature, since the unionists would be most unlikely to participate (except on conditions about the Agreement which there could be no question of accepting), even if privately Mr Molyneaux and Mr Paisley might wish otherwise. Mr Nally was inclined to agree. He and I agreed that a time might come when the calling of a Round Table Conference, or lesser moves by the Government, might encourage the emergence of moderate unionist leaders who would seek to oppose the Anglo-Irish Agreement by political means alone. We should need to be alert to the possibility of a "window" appearing for some such move in the next few weeks, though it might well not emerge until the autumn, after the marching season - unwelcome though the prospect was of several months of continuing protest action. It would be important that the two Governments should stay in close contact on this subject. Mr Nally spoke of the possibility of a pause of, say, six weeks between meetings of the Intergovernmental Conference, during which an effort might be made to mount a Round Table Conference on devolution. During such a pause, sub-groups of the Intergovernmental Conference would continue to meet. The pause might be publicly declared,

by announcing at the end of one meeting of the Conference that the next one would be on a fixed date, which would be about six weeks later. At one point, Mr Nally said that the meeting of the Intergovernmental Conference on 11 March might be followed by another in two weeks' time, after which the six weeks' pause might follow. But the sense of his remarks was that the timing of a pause should be dependent on the two Governments' assessment of the best time for the British Government to call a Round Table Conference.

6. The keynote of the Irish officials' assessment of the events on 3 March was that our overall handling of a potentially very dangerous situation could not be criticised; but that the feelings of the minority about apparent fraternisation in certain places between the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and loyalist protesters had set back the recent progress in relations between the minority and the security forces in Northern Ireland. The Irish side mentioned, however, as an example of how Mr Hume was now asserting himself in the SDLP, that his deputy, Mr Seamus Mallon MP, had wanted to issue a statement on behalf of the Party criticising the conduct of the RUC on 3 March and that Mr Hume had had no difficulty in over-ruling this. They said that at recent meetings with the Taoiseach Mr Hume's position had seemed to be more open-minded and flexible.

7. In a discussion of cross-border security co-operation, we stressed to the Irish team the need to achieve concrete results. Both sides agreed that the sub-group of the Intergovernmental Conference which comprises the two police chiefs and senior officials was the right forum for an effort to overcome the misunderstandings which have long been endemic in this area. Mr Nally, quoting from an internal Irish paper, said that the Garda had come to the view, following your recent meeting with the Taoiseach, that it was desirable that they should undertake some form of special surveillance and that they had asked the RUC for

views on this. I said that we would be glad to provide training or ~~technical~~ assistance. The Irish response was that this might be easier as between Great Britain and the Irish Republic than on a north/south basis, and if technical assistance was paid for by the Irish side. I said that we should have no objection to accepting payment.

8. I am sending copies of this minute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

RA

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

12 March 1986

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