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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

6 February 1985

Prime Minister

Interesting that the
Irish are no longer pressing
for early agreement or an
early summit.

CJP
7/2.

Dear Charles,

Meeting between the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and Mr Barry, Foreign Minister, Republic of Ireland, 4 February 1985

I enclose a record of the part of the meeting during which secret and personal matters were discussed.

I am sending copies to Graham Sandiford (NIO) and Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

Yours ever,

Len Appleyard

(L V Appleyard)

C D Powell Esq
10 Downing Street

RECORD OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND AND THE IRISH FOREIGN MINISTER AT THE FCO ON 4 FEBRUARY 1985 AT 3pm

Present:

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe MP	HE Mr Peter Barry
The Rt Hon Douglas Hurd MP	HE Mr Noel Dorr
Mr Robert Andrew	Mr Séan Donlon
Mr Goodall	Mr Michael Lillis
Mr Brennan	
Mr Appleyard	
Mr Clark	
Mr Lyon	

1. Sir Geoffrey Howe said that as there was to be a further meeting between Sir Robert Armstrong and Mr Dermot Nally on Friday 8 February he thought it would be useful for both sides to exchange views informally on the state of play. He hoped that the Irish would see the British proposal of 21 January as a response to the situation that had emerged at the end of the Chequers Summit. We were aware that to concentrate on security matters alone would create difficulties for the Irish Government and so we had tried to find a basis on which productive discussion might take place. Mr Barry said that the British proposal was being studied by a Ministerial sub-committee of the Irish Government. The considered Irish response would be given in writing by Mr Nally to Sir Robert Armstrong on 8 February. His personal feeling was that the British proposal did not go far enough and concentrated too much on security. He understood the reasons for this, but the Irish view was that while security measures by themselves might dampen down the security problems they would not solve the central political problem. In both British and Irish interests there must be political involvement from the Republic. Mr Hurd said that we had taken this view on board, and agreed that security questions should not be treated narrowly. The British proposal reflected that. We also accepted that there should be Irish involvement. In statements made in

Northern Ireland he had not said anything about the details of the British proposal, but he had repeated three or four times that there must be Irish involvement, partly so that any agreement which might eventually be reached would not come as a surprise to the public. Reactions had been very interesting. Mr Molyneaux had made two statements: his first (made when Dr Paisley was in Africa) had been rather in favour of Irish involvement. When Dr Paisley returned and attacked the notion, Mr Molyneaux had back-tracked. He had however told Mr Hurd that his first reaction was his real one.

2. Mr Barry asked how much of these reactions were tactical, in relation to the May local elections. Mr Hurd said that it was difficult to say. An atmosphere had been created in which the parties all had an incentive to appear reasonable, but this might not last. Mr Barry said that it was more important for parties to appear reasonable in local elections than in General Elections. The timing of any agreement was therefore of great importance. He was afraid that if we reached agreement and came out with it in advance of the elections the unionists might raise a cry of sell-out. It could be just as dangerous if they suspected that an agreement of this kind was in the wind and acted accordingly. Sir Geoffrey Howe said it would be very difficult to publicise an agreement in the middle of the election campaign. We should either try to move fast or wait until after the elections were over. There was a down-side to both courses. Mr Hurd suggested that it was better to be seen to be "travelling hopefully" as the elections approached. Mr Barry asked whether the local elections could be postponed. Mr John Hume had said in the House of Commons that he thought there ought first to be a new electoral register requiring proofs of identity. Mr Hurd said that there were legal obstacles to postponement, and that it would be politically disastrous if postponement were linked in any way to the secret talks. Mr Andrew added that Sinn Fein would say that the postponement was because the British Government was scared at the possibility that Sinn Fein might win. Mr Barry confessed that he found it difficult to make his mind up about timing. His suggestion of postponement was not frivolous: the Irish Government had postponed its own local

elections from 1984 to 1985. But if postponement was not possible he would prefer to say nothing about the talks now and to take matters slowly. He was afraid that if we rushed it the unionists might mount an extreme campaign against any agreement, and if they then did well in the elections as a consequence this would be seen as blocking progress.

3. Sir Geoffrey Howe said that it was going to be very difficult to sell the proposal to the unionists at any time. He agreed with Mr Hurd that the best thing was for the two Governments to go on talking through the elections. Mr Barry asked whether the marching season would not then become an inhibiting factor. It was pointed out that there was a gap between the elections and the marching season, and the latter was in any case not a completely closed season for political initiatives. Mr Andrew said that progress in the discussions about a devolved government was relevant. So far it had been slow. Mr Hume had shown no signs of eagerness to move quickly, or before the elections on devolution. Sir Geoffrey Howe said that the process of reaching agreement was in any case likely to take longer than one expected at the beginning.

4. Sir Geoffrey Howe went on to say that, viewed objectively, the British proposal was a historic document, which would have been inconceivable not many months earlier. It was imbued with a sense of the need for an Irish dimension and gave real hope for a possible solution. Mr Barry acknowledged that the document was historic, but added that both sides must make sure that it worked. We would not wish to go round this track again in the next generation. It was vital therefore that any deal should have a full political dimension. The Irish were a very political people (especially perhaps in Northern Ireland) and to have any hope of success they must be made to feel politically involved in their own future.

5. Mr Barry asked whether the unionists could go back on their refusal to contemplate power sharing. Mr Hurd said that the reactions to his statements about possible devolution had been interesting. All the parties had reacted edgily. It was notable

that Mr Hume had kept his options open for talks with the unionists at the SDLP Conference. Before the latest row (over Mr Hume meeting the PIRA) he (Mr Hurd) had wondered whether it might be possible to set up one to one meetings between the party leaders to explore the edges of their flexibility. His impression was that unionists were keen to avoid calling any arrangements power-sharing but in practice would be prepared to tolerate many power-sharing elements. It was relevant that Mr Hume apparently did not wish to get involved in serious discussions before the May elections, although he professed to be keen to discover whether the unionists had really changed their views. In parallel to this the Assembly Report Committee, which had been doing very useful work, were constantly complaining that they could not do their job properly if the SDLP would not talk to them. It was for this reason that they had invited Bishop Cahal Daly to address them. He thought it too soon to say whether the Report Committee would get much further.

6. Mr Barry asked whether Dr Paisley would agree to Mr Hume heading a governmental committee, even though they would not be sitting together as members of a cabinet. Mr Hurd thought he probably would, but had not approached him personally.

Dr Paisley was a divided man. He had discovered some of the arts of mastering briefs and the attractions of power. Mr Barry said that he appeared to have changed, but wondered whether he could lead his people in a new direction. Mr Andrew said that the size of the proposed Irish dimension was important: the larger it was the more difficult it would be for Dr Paisley. Mr Hurd added that the British proposal did not depend on devolution being in place or on unionist acquiescence.

7. Mr Goodall asked whether the Irish Government were more concerned to see a substantial role for the minority community or to achieve a substantial Irish dimension. Mr Barry said they were concerned on both scores but the balance should be right. Mr Goodall said that it might not be possible to make progress on both fronts simultaneously: giving the Irish Government a role in Northern Ireland would change the landscape there in an historic way. We took the point that Irish involvement could not be

For an unhappy formulation
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confined to security matters, and our proposal had been carefully devised to address the areas which the nationalist community had complained about in recent years. It covered things like policing, the law and courts, discrimination and the Flags and Emblems Act. It was misleading to describe this as concentration on security. Sir Geoffrey Howe said our aim was to "de-mystify" the process. There were parallels in legal life for avoiding awkward words and devising rather neutral sounding arrangements like "setting up a body". Mr Donlon saw the advantage of this: he referred to some remarks by Mr Hume about sovereignty being an outmoded concept.

8. Mr Barry said that the British proposal referred in several places to devolved government, but it was not clear whether the British envisaged both an Irish dimension and devolved government arrangements being in place before the agreement would take effect. Mr Goodall explained that before the Chequers Summit the Irish side had complained that what the British side then appeared to be offering by way of an Irish dimension was conditional on the successful introduction of arrangements for devolved government; and that as this was a very difficult condition to satisfy it could have the effect of nullifying the offer. We had therefore formulated our proposal of 21 January so that the arrangements envisaged would not depend on the existence of a devolved government in Northern Ireland. Mr Hurd said that it would however be more difficult to get an Irish dimension accepted if Mr Hume and the SDLP were being negative about proposals for devolved government. In effect we were prepared to give the minority community two lines of approach. For example on policing the Irish Government could have a voice in the new arrangements (as proposed in our paper) but he was also keen to involve the minority community in the new arrangements which were shortly to be introduced for investigating complaints against police behaviour. These two things could operate in parallel. Sir Geoffrey Howe said that neither side wanted to be held hostage to the arrangements for devolved government but it was clear that it would be easier to attract support in Northern Ireland for the British proposal if a devolved government had been established.

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9. Mr Donlon said that Mr Hurd had said earlier that Mr Hume wanted to test unionist opinion (but not before May). He had told the Irish Government that he thought Mr Hurd was going to test unionist opinion first so that he could know whether there was something to work on. Was there a misunderstanding here or was it a parallel move that he had in mind? Mr Hurd said that the unionists were thinking in terms of a similar pincer movement. They wanted to know in advance how serious Mr Hume was. It was for this reason that he had suggested that an intermediary might be needed to get things moving. He did not think it would be appropriate for him to be the intermediary himself. But it would be important to find someone whom all sides trusted. There had already been some signs of movement by the parties. Mr Barry asked whether that movement was simply tactical in advance of the elections. Mr Hurd said that he thought that the parties saw the elections not as a reason for moving forward but as a reason for going slowly. The problem was that each leader appeared to see his electorate as extremist, so that the elections gave no-one any inducement to appear more reasonable. Mr Barry said it was for that reason that he had suggested postponing the elections. Mr Lillis queried whether postponement would give a propaganda boost to Sinn Fein. Mr Andrew said it would be difficult to find a reason for postponement sufficiently plausible to prevent people from saying that the real reason was that HMG was scared that Sinn Fein would defeat the SDLP. In answer to a question from Mr Barry, Mr Hurd said that it would be very difficult to find a legal pretext for postponement.

10. Mr Hurd said that it looked as though Sinn Fein were aiming to increase the number of seats they held to the maximum. Since they held only a handful of seats at present, they would probably succeed, even though their total vote would probably not increase. Leaving aside the practical problems that an increase in Sinn Fein councillors would pose, there was a serious risk that the press would present this increase as a Sinn Fein break-through. Mr Lillis said that the single transferable vote had some advantages here as most of the Sinn Fein second

preferences went to the SDLP but not vice versa. There was a very solid anti-violence vote. Mr Barry added that the Irish Government thought that the single transferable vote system should apply to the Northern Ireland constituencies at Westminster too.

11. Mr Goodall said that the SDLP had made it clear that they were not interested in an internal solution without an Irish dimension. The British proposal addressed that concern. Making every allowance for nationalist sensitivities about the British role in Northern Ireland, it was important to recognise that the involvement now envisaged for the Irish Government would be something unique in relations between separate states in Western Europe. This could be said to correspond to the uniqueness of the relationship between the island of Ireland and Great Britain: but it would be a very far reaching change in British eyes and not one which it would be easy for the British Government to justify to parliamentary and public opinion in the UK. Mr Barry said that the Irish did not have a repugnance for the British system of law and order. They had imitated most of it. Their objection was to the way in which it operated in Northern Ireland. Mr Goodall said that the British proposal gave the Irish Government opportunities to seek to correct those aspects of the system which they believed to be inequitable in Northern Ireland. Mr Dorr said that the problem for his Government was that most of this was implicit rather than explicit.

12. Mr Lillis commended the ingenuity of the British proposal but pointed out that it would give rise to serious problems of presentation for the Irish. Mr Brennan said that the proposal had been drafted so as to make the substance clear. Presentation would need to be considered separately. The fact had to be faced that much of what the Irish Government would like to make explicit would have to be kept implicit for the purposes of presentation in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. Sir Geoffrey Howe said that this was often a difficulty with agreements between two countries. Mr Barry said that it was a substantive point. It might well happen that Irish representations on security policy would make no difference to

what was done. How could that be presented positively to nationalist opinion? The British proposal's concentration on security compounded the difficulties. Mr Goodall said that it would be more accurate to describe the proposal as focussing on law and order, at which nationalist complaints were chiefly directed. Sir Geoffrey Howe said that law and order always had two aspects: firstly the effect on the good guys - eg the relations of the police to the community; and secondly the efficiency of the pursuit of the bad guys. The British proposal was mainly directed to the first aspect. Mr Andrew said that the starting point for the British proposal had been the concerns which the Taoiseach had expressed to the Prime Minister at Chequers. Mr Barry accepted that but said that the root of the problem was political. If the political problem could be solved the security problems would fall into place. Sir Geoffrey Howe pointed out that the British proposal was mainly directed towards that. It must be understood that it would be difficult for the British Government to go further towards meeting Irish concerns. Mr Lillis said that the Irish Government's consideration of the British proposal was not yet complete. Both Governments appeared to have a preference for the proposed inter-governmental arrangements and the arrangements for devolved government to proceed in tandem. Was it the British view that the proposal now under discussion should be implemented first in the hope that on that basis the SDLP would cooperate on devolved government? Sir Geoffrey Howe said that we had not thought the timing through in detail. Mr Hurd said that it would probably be easier for the two Governments to reach agreement first, before devolved government could be introduced. The SDLP were saying that there could be no discussion of an internal solution because there was no Irish dimension on offer. So if as a result of the current inter-governmental talks an Irish dimension became available, the SDLP ought to become more cooperative in relation to devolved government. Mr Barry asked whether the British saw the Irish dimension diminishing after devolved government was in place. Mr Hurd said not necessarily in the short term. The two might co-exist side by side. He did not see this as a major problem.

13. Mr Barry asked whether this meant that the British Government was looking for a quick agreement. Mr Hurd said that was not so. He thought it better to travel hopefully and to pursue the dialogue. It would be different if Mr Hume were arguing that the SDLP would be eliminated unless something were done quickly: but that was not his position. Mr Barry said that Mr Hume felt the need for quick action, but agreed that it was not necessary before the elections. But if there were too long a gap between the November 1984 Summit and the next one Sinn Fein could argue that only they could deliver the goods to the nationalist community. Mr Lillis said that although the idea of postponing the elections reflected conversations with Mr Hume, it was an Irish Government suggestion, not one put forward by Mr Hume. All the same he had the feeling that Mr Hume would like something to emerge before the elections. The unionists also seemed to be nervous about the elections. Sir Geoffrey Howe said that all parties were nervous before elections but that was not a reason for postponing them.

14. Mr Barry asked about the possibility of an immediate Summit to review progress. Mr Goodall thought this would be unsatisfactory. Expectations would be raised. People would assume that the Summit was going to set the seal on an agreement. If it did not there would be damaging recriminations. But it would be normal for the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach to have a meeting in the margins of the European Council at the end of March. Mr Hurd said that such a meeting could be helpfully presented "as a review of progress". Mr Donlon commented finally that the six weeks between a March meeting and the elections was a long time in terms of events in Northern Ireland. It would be difficult in the interim, given that it would be an election period, to prevent doors from slamming. A number of doors appeared at the moment to be open and we should take advantage of that.

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