



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

8 March, 1985.

Dear Jen,

Anglo-Irish Relations

The Prime Minister held a meeting this morning to continue the discussion begun on 14 February of the Irish Government's response to HMG's proposal for institutionalised intergovernmental consultation on Northern Ireland. The Foreign Secretary, the Northern Ireland Secretary, Sir Robert Armstrong, Mr. Andrew and Mr. Goodall were present.

The meeting considered the Irish Government's request that the proposed joint body should be able to discuss economic and social matters in Northern Ireland. It was suggested that, provided discussion was limited to matters on which the Northern Ireland Secretary exercised responsibility and which concerned discrimination against the minority, such an extension of the subjects to be covered by the joint body could safely be accepted. Against this it was argued that if we agreed to discuss these matters with the Irish Government, we should in effect be allowing the nationalist minority in the North to put their views on economic and social questions through the Republic. The incentive for them to participate in the structures of local government would then be greatly reduced. It would also represent a very substantial widening of the Irish Government's role. The only circumstances in which it might be considered were those in which the Irish Government were prepared to revert to their proposal of a referendum to amend Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution.

The Prime Minister said that the formulations in the text of the draft agreement needed to be scrutinised carefully. She did not approve of the title 'Coordinating Committee' since this implied an equality of status for the British and Irish Governments. The same consideration would apply to 'Joint Committee'. 'Consultative Committee' would be more appropriate, although this would be harder for the Irish Government to accept. The reference to the tasks of the Committee being to 'resolve differences' implied wrongly that the Committee had powers of decision, as did the suggestion in paragraph 11 that it would be for the Committee to judge whether a Bill of Rights would be desirable in Northern Ireland. It was not accurate to say

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(in paragraph 3) that the Irish Government would maintain an office in Belfast: it would be the AIIC which would have an office, within which Irish Government representatives would be accommodated. The text as a whole needed to be scrutinised carefully with Unionist sensitivities on points such as these in mind, and amendments negotiated where possible.

The meeting then considered the overall balance of the agreement which it was proposed to reach with the Irish Government.

It was argued, on the one hand, that agreement on the joint body would lead to improved security cooperation with the Republic. It ought also to be possible to secure some assurance from the Irish Government of its acceptance of the constitutional position of the North. Agreement to a role for the Republic in the North was the best hope of persuading the SDLP to play a part in moves towards devolution. An agreement would also be well received in the United States. Failure to reach agreement after so much progress had been made would cause great disappointment in the Republic and among the minority in the North, lose us the support of the US Administration, and lead to a deterioration in security cooperation.

Against this it was argued that agreement to set up the joint body without some more substantial quid pro quo from the Irish Government than was at present on offer would unsettle the Unionists when they were showing welcome signs of being more cooperative. It would seem to them that the Irish Government were being given a role in the North without paying any worthwhile price for it. Nor could we seem to be putting foreign policy considerations first. We must therefore seek the strongest possible declaration by the Irish Government of its recognition of the constitutional status of the North and the impossibility of changing it except by consent, as well as an undertaking to ensure that the SDLP would play a full part in moves towards devolution.

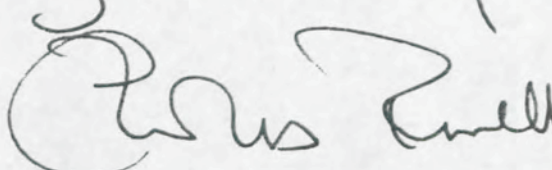
As regards the timing of further discussions with the Irish Government, it was noted that Dr. FitzGerald was anxious for an early summit and was leaking information to the press in an effort to precipitate this, though some of his colleagues were more cautious. But there was no advantage for the United Kingdom in an early meeting, and it was essential to avoid commitment to a further summit unless its success was assured. There was a risk that the proposed visit by the Foreign Secretary and Northern Ireland Secretary to Dublin would be seen as a move by the United Kingdom to accelerate the negotiations. If the meeting was to go ahead, it must be used to carry forward the process of reducing the Irish Government's expectations.

Finally the meeting considered whether the Chairman of the All Party Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Group should be encouraged to explore Irish reactions to the possible setting up of an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary body. While such

a body could eventually play a useful role, discussion of it at this stage might further raise Irish expectations and Unionist suspicions.

Summing up the discussion, the Prime Minister said that at their forthcoming meeting with Irish Ministers, the Foreign Secretary and Northern Ireland Secretary must explain that the United Kingdom could not accept widening of the remit of the proposed joint body to permit discussion of economic and social matters other than cross-border issues. Otherwise we should be inviting the minority in the North to opt out of the structures of government. The text of the proposal for a Joint Body should also be revised to reflect more accurately its consultative nature. In effect, this meant going back to our original Option A proposal. The Irish Government should be left in no doubt that we would require firm commitments from them on recognition that there could be no change in the constitutional position of the North without consent, and on the SDLP's readiness to play a full part in moves towards devolution in the North. She would also make these points to Dr. FitzGerald when she met him in the margins of the European Council. No undertakings should be given about the timing of a further summit. Meanwhile no encouragement should be given to moves to explore the possibility of an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Body.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretary to the Northern Ireland Secretary and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours sincerely


C.D. Powell

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Foreign and Commonwealth Office.