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RECORD OF A MEETING BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE
TAOISEACH AT CHEQUERS ON MONDAY 19 NOVEMBER AT 0945

Present:

Prime Minister
Sir Robert Armstrong
Mr Powell

The Taoiseach
Mr Nally
Mr Lillis

The Prime Minister welcomed the Taoiseach to this round of Anglo-Irish consultations. Reflecting on their private conversation the evening before, she was struck by the difficulty in translating general propositions into practical results. None the less she was ready to work towards this objective. But some serious questions had to be asked. Was there really a chance of amending the Irish Constitution so as to recognise the border between the Republic and the North for the foreseeable future? Or would that become unattainable in the heat of a referendum campaign? If the latter was a serious risk, it might be better to work for less ambitious objectives, particularly in the field of security co-operation. She noted the emphasis which the Taoiseach had put on measures to give more confidence to the minority in the North. But it was very difficult to translate that into practical policies without so upsetting the majority as to lead to heightened violence. She was worried by the prospects of what might emerge from such violence. The IRA did not represent just an Irish dimension, it had a Marxist and an international terrorist dimension grafted onto it. She was beginning to understand what the United States felt about Nicaragua.

The Taoiseach said that he too was very concerned on this last point. If no action was taken to halt the drift towards violence, the constitutional forces would be unable

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to continue and the ground would be left to Sinn Fein. Sinn Fein were putting it about that they would not contest the local elections in May. The Irish Government thought this was a tactical ploy to lull others, including the SDLP, into a false sense of security. If real progress could not be made as a result of the Anglo-Irish talks Sinn Fein would take over as the voice of the minority.

The Taoiseach continued that expectations of Irish unity in the Republic had been reduced to a point where changing Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution was feasible. A united Ireland was no longer regarded as a serious prospect. This shift in opinion had taken place amongst the minority in the North of Ireland as well. But the nationalist minority were harrassed by Sinn Fein and intimidated by the IRA with the result that they were utterly demoralised. All they wanted was to live in peace as Irish people in the island of Ireland, maintaining their Irish identity. The Prime Minister wondered whether their grievances really ^{were} so great since direct rule. The Taoiseach said that the nationalists were proud of being Irish. They could not identify with Britain. They could not see why they were not allowed to express their identity and fly their flag, nor why the security forces which policed them were from another community who bullied and intimidated them. They wanted security forces with whom they could identify and political processes in which they could participate.

The Prime Minister said that in a sense these problems were common to minorities in many countries. But what the Taoiseach seemed to be saying was that the minority in Northern Ireland wanted to make its living there but owe its allegiance to the Republic. She did not see how this wish could be granted. The Taoiseach said that nowhere in Europe was there an analogous situation where one-sixth of the people had relatives or close friends in prison or a death

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rate from violence which on the mainland of the United Kingdom would be equivalent to 100,000. The Prime Minister replied that there was not another terrorist movement in Europe as active as the IRA. She acknowledged that there was a real problem over policing. It was not proving possible to recruit enough Catholics into the RUC. Part of the problem was that the SDLP would not let them join.

The Prime Minister continued that one conclusion that she drew from this was that priority should be given to a Joint Security Commission. This would be advisory but would also be a forum in which the Irish Minister of Justice could raise the problems and complaints of the minority community. The Taoiseach said that this was not enough. The minority needed to be policed by people from its own community. This was particularly the case in the ghetto areas of West Belfast and Derry. If the police were drawn from the area itself it would be easier to get Catholics to join and serve. As it was there was no policing at all in these areas and Catholics were left at the mercy of the IRA. The RUC needed to be reorganised and strengthened by bringing in members of the minority community. The Prime Minister said that the Chief Constable was happy to recruit Catholics though he would not deploy them in the streets from which they came. The difficulty lay in getting volunteers. The Taoiseach said that more was needed. The minority must be able to identify with their local police. He cited the example of Brussels which had 46 police forces each representing the appropriate balance between Flemings and Walloons.

The Prime Minister said that she was worried by the trend of the conversation. The Taoiseach seemed to be saying that he wanted a Republican enclave in Northern Ireland. The Taoiseach reacted strongly: 85,000 Catholics had been driven out of their homes in the mixed areas into ghettos, the biggest forced population move in Europe since

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World War Two. In their ghettos they were terrorized by the IRA and the police would not go in. All he was seeking was effective policing with which the minority community could identify in the areas where it predominated. The Prime Minister asked whether the IRA might not infiltrate the police if more Roman Catholics were recruited. The Taoiseach said that intelligence should be good enough to prevent this. The IRA had never succeeded in penetrating the Garda. The Prime Minister observed that it was more likely that the IRA would terrorize Catholics out of volunteering.

The Taoiseach continued that the police force in the republican areas must derive its authority from a body acceptable to minority opinion. The Republic could provide that legitimacy. The Prime Minister said that to envisage the police deriving authority from outside Northern Ireland was going too far. Was not the right course to start by setting up a Joint Security Commission so that the sort of points raised by the Taoiseach could be thrashed out in detail? Its role would have to be advisory. It might consist of the Northern Ireland Secretary, the Irish Minister of Justice, the two most senior police officials from Northern Ireland and the Republic and two other officials. The Taoiseach said that clarity would be needed about its role. There were at least three important elements with which the Joint Security Commission must deal: appointments, operational guidelines, and complaints. The minority would need to see it playing a significant role on all three. More importantly, the Joint Security Commission would have to be set in a broader political framework. Otherwise his Government would be accused of simply lending its support to British repression. The Prime Minister said that the whole point was to help people living in the nationalist areas whom the Taoiseach said had no effective security. The Taoiseach repeated that the police force must operate in a political framework with which the minority

could identify. At the moment there was both political alienation and security alienation.

The Prime Minister said that the possibilities for co-operation on legal matters should also be looked at. The Taoiseach agreed. He thought that the anti-terrorism laws in the Republic and in the North could be harmonised quite quickly. There was already a schedule of joint offences. Harmonising of criminal law as a whole would be a much longer term undertaking. At the same time a Bill of Rights would be needed for Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister asked why the SDLP continued to refuse to come into the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Taoiseach replied that the reason was simple: the Unionists had always refused to contemplate power sharing. Indeed they insisted on the permanent exclusion of the minority from power. The Prime Minister said that this was the fate of minorities when parties were based on religion or race. But facts had to be faced. She did not know anyone on the Unionist side who would accept power sharing. One had also to try to see things from their point of view. They lived next door to a country which claimed their territory and were naturally reluctant to share power with a minority which owed allegiance to that country. Power sharing simply was not on, which is why the British Government had searched for other solutions.

The Taoiseach said that power-sharing could not be excluded though he recognised it caused serious problems. There were two alternative roads which might be explored. The first was the proposal made by Mr Prior when Northern Ireland Secretary for an executive separate from the Assembly chaired by the Secretary of State who would appoint to it people from both communities. This had been discussed with the parties but never proceeded with. Reactions to it had not been so bad. The second possibility was to give the

Republic some role in the Government of Northern Ireland in conjunction with the Secretary of State. This would at least give the Unionists a strong incentive to move towards devolved Government so as to limit the number of issues on which the Irish Government would have a say.

The Prime Minister said that the Anglo-Irish consultations were not the appropriate place to try to establish a structure of Government in Northern Ireland. The first idea mentioned by the Taoiseach was alien to our tradition under which the executive emerged from legislature. The Prime Minister continued that she agreed that any solution in Northern Ireland had to be generally acceptable to both the majority and minority community. This had been the goal of Sir Humphrey Atkins' efforts and indeed of the 1982 Act. The problem was that it had hitherto proved impossible to find a basis which was acceptable to both communities. One thing was certain: any such basis would only emerge from direct discussions between the two communities. The Taoiseach suggested that this would simply be to give the Unionists a right of veto. The Prime Minister said that rather they would not get the devolved Government that they wanted unless they agreed to arrangements acceptable to both communities. We thought there was a strong incentive there. But one had to ask oneself seriously: was the animosity so fundamental that agreement would never be attained? Or was it just a question of finding the right formula?

The Prime Minister said that she would try to summarise what had been said so far. The Taoiseach had argued that no progress was possible in the North unless security was improved and the minority obtained a structure of law and policing which protected them. She had proposed a Joint Security Commission where these issues could be thrashed out and dealt with. The Taoiseach had said that this could not happen without a political structure. She had pointed out

that HMG had made several attempts at creating such a structure but had never been able to achieve one acceptable to both communities.

The Taoiseach said that he saw some evidence that opinion among the Unionists was shifting. The DUP seemed able to visualise the possibility of going into opposition. The UUP were showing some sensitivity to the Irish identity. He thought these factors made it worthwhile looking closely again at the two ideas he had mentioned: the appointed executive or a role for an Irish Minister. The Prime Minister said that the second smacked of joint authority. The Taoiseach had earlier used the phrase that an Irish Minister would play a role "in conjunction with the Secretary of State". This was absolutely not on. The Taoiseach said that the phrase had been chosen with care. He was not saying exactly what the role would be. He understood the Prime Minister's position on joint authority although he regarded it as unfortunate. Equally he had to make clear that consultation alone was not enough. The Prime Minister repeated that joint authority simply would not work. The Taoiseach said that some relationship which gave the Irish Government a say was required. It simply would not be enough to bolster security co-operation without giving the Republic some wider say. The Prime Minister said that she still could not see why it was not possible to start with the Joint Security Commission. The Taoiseach said that he would explain his position once more. He was prepared to amend the Irish Constitution to make clear that there could be no change in the status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority. This was a big risk for him. (The Prime Minister said that she recognised that.) He simply had to have a package which would enable the minority in the North to support his Government in the referendum campaign. This had to be sufficient to give the minority hope of being able to live in dignity as Irish people with fair policing and courts and a role in

determining their own future. The Prime Minister said that this still gave her major difficulty. The Taoiseach seemed to be saying that the minority community should have a police force whose allegiance would be to an authority over the border. It seemed to her that what was being sought was to achieve the effect of repartition without actually doing it in geographical terms. The Taoiseach said that there was no question of repartition. It would lead to a West Bank situation. But something had to be done for the minority community. It was a tragedy that so many families in both communities wanted their young to leave Northern Ireland because they saw no future. He and the Prime Minister had a joint duty to create a better future for them.

The Taoiseach said that he would summarise his views. The Nationalists in the North would accept the status quo if they could express their Irishness in the same way that the Unionists express their Britishness. He believed profoundly that matters had reached a point where it was possible to find a way through. But if the opportunity was missed, the Sinn Fein would get on top and there would be a risk of a civil war. There was not much time. The key was to find a way to enable the minority to have a role. Power sharing was one way. If that could not be achieved, some measure of Irish Government involvement would be needed, together with a system of mixed courts and changes in policing arrangements. These three elements would dry up the water in which the terrorists swam and would enable his Government to win a referendum on changes in the Irish Constitution. But if changes were made only in the security field, these efforts would fail. There had to be a political system which the minority could identify with. The Prime Minister repeated that it seemed to her that the price of the Irish Government recognising the border seemed to be their taking over 40 per cent of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister continued that Westminster could

not impose anything on Northern Ireland. The two communities there must agree between themselves. The Taoiseach returned to the point that there must be some Irish involvement which was compatible with British sovereignty. Consultation was not enough because the views of the Republic could too easily be ignored. Something had to be found which lay between joint authority and consultation. For instance there might be a commitment by the British Government to "seek to agree" with Irish Ministers. In the event of no agreement, there could be appeal to the two Prime Ministers. The Prime Minister said that this again was joint authority and could not be accepted. The Secretary of State's hands would be fettered. The Taoiseach said that without this the Republic would be asked to change its Constitution on the basis of a right of consultation with no guarantee that such consultation would be serious or that Irish views would carry weight. They must have some assurance that consultation would be meaningful.

The Prime Minister said that it would be ideal if the Republic were to change its Constitution. But the essence was to take a step forward, if necessary a more modest one. It seemed to her that the best prospect lay in security co-operation. At the same time the Northern Ireland Secretary would continue his consultations with the parties in the North and see what progress they could make towards a basis for devolved Government acceptable to both sides.

The meeting adjourned at 11.30.

19 November 1984