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ROINN AN TAOISIGH

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MEETING BETWEEN THE TAOISEACH AND NORTHERN IRELAND
SECRETARY OF STATE, MR. ATKINS, GOVERNMENT BUILDINGS,
15TH APRIL, 1980.

The meeting commenced shortly after 10 a.m. and finished at 10.30 p.m. The Taoiseach was accompanied by the undersigned. The Secretary of State was accompanied by the British Ambassador and Mr. Stowe, Permanent Secretary of the Northern Ireland Office.

The Taoiseach opened by welcoming the Secretary of State and mentioning his intention to visit Northern Ireland for the enthronement of Dr. Armstrong in Armagh, on 7th May. He said that he would like to make use of the occasion to visit Saul, if this did not present insurmountable difficulties. The Secretary of State took note of the Taoiseach's wish and said that, off hand, he did not see any difficulties but he would make enquiries. There was then some short discussion about the communique to issue after the Secretary of State's meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

In reply to a query from the Taoiseach, the Secretary of State said that he had found the recent conference to be extremely useful. It had brought people together who might never otherwise have met. It had proved to all parties concerned in it that there were certain things which just could not be done. This was so, not because the British or anybody else wanted it this way, but because some parties had insurmountable objections. A principle which he thought emerged from the conference was that any settlement must be acceptable. Sunningdale, the present conference and all his experience told him that there just could not be an imposed settlement. There were certain lines and limits which just could not be crossed.

The Taoiseach mentioned the recent radio interview given by Dr. Paisley in which he had said that a settlement must be totally in a Northern Ireland context and had then gone on to say that in a Northern Ireland context there could be no power sharing. This sort of logic and reasoning put the SDLP and other minority interests in an impossible position. Mr. Atkins said that Dr. Paisley, like every other leader in Northern Ireland was continually looking over his shoulder. The lessons from the fall of Mr. Faulkner were very strong in the mind of every Northern politician; they just would not go too far ahead of their followers or

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their ground roots support. The Taoiseach said that any attempt at a settlement, totally in a Northern Ireland context just would not succeed. It would represent a most serious withdrawal on the part of the British from positions which had long been accepted. He had only to instance the Government of Ireland Act, 1920, which, at Section 2, referred quite specifically to "the eventual establishment of a Parliament for the whole of Ireland". Any back tracking from this sort of position would be regarded as a most serious recession, on the part of the British, from positions they had long held. The Government here would be seriously disturbed by such a development. It would be opposed by the SDLP and other Nationalist interests in Northern Ireland and, he had no doubt, the IRA would become even more active, and perhaps more widely supported than at present.

The Taoiseach said he had the feeling that the present was a time for courageous moves on Northern Ireland. The present Prime Minister had the opportunity of achieving what no other Prime Minister had ever achieved - and he mentioned Asquith, Gladstone and others. The important thing was to approach the whole problem in a broad historical context.

Mr. Atkins said that it was important to take time into account. There could be no final solution now. What was important was to start things moving. Other things would then develop. We do not know in what way these developments will come about but, on all probabilities, they would happen by inches (or millimeters) at a time.

The Taoiseach said that the problem must be looked at in the broadest context. In that context anything was possible. He wanted to emphasise that in that context, nothing was ruled out - not even the most revolutionary or radical solutions. In a conference table situation, all options were open. He wanted to emphasise as strongly as he could that there was nothing restrictive, intransigent or inhibited in our approach and he would like the British side to take particular notice of this position.

Mr. Atkins said that they recognised the strong interest of the Irish Government in the problem and that it was sensible to keep us closely in touch with what was happening. But they must also bear in mind that

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if Dr. Paisley hears we are discussing Northern Ireland with the Dublin Government, the whole conference and the whole possibility of talks, could blow up in their face.

The Taoiseach then went on to say that what he had in mind for the meeting with the British Prime Minister, in Luxembourg, was that it should be brief - a simple "getting to know you" type of meeting. Following this introductory arrangement, there could be a full meeting at a date and place to be arranged. He would like the Secretary of State to assure the Prime Minister that we were on the side of the angels in the type of solution we were seeking in Luxembourg. We had a strong vested interest in having the U.K. problem solved, once and for all.

On the North he wanted to emphasise that what he was saying was not a reflection, simply, of any old flag waving republicanism. At the Fianna Fail Youth Conference in Limerick the Delegates had been very angry at the omission of Northern Ireland from the topics for discussion. They had insisted that a specific slot be provided for a debate on the subject and the participation had been strong and enthusiastic. Mr. Atkins said that a similar atmosphere obtained in the North. Both of Dr. Paisley's closest aides were young men, in the thirties, so far as he could discern.

The meeting ended at this point - with the usual formalities. The Secretary of State left for his meeting with the Minister for Foreign Affairs, in Iveagh House.



16th April, 1980.

(Copy to : - Mr. D. Neligan, Assistant Secretary,
Department of Foreign Affairs).