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Note:Interview between Taoiseach and British Ambassador,
28 July, 1981

The Taoiseach summoned the British Ambassador on 28 July and received him at 4.30 p.m. for the purpose of discussing Mrs. Thatcher's letter to leading U.S. Politicians, published that morning. The Taoiseach based his remarks on the attached speaking note. (Annex I) The Minister Designate was present

The Taoiseach said he was anxious to talk to the Ambassador as he took a serious view of the letter sent by Prime Minister Thatcher to a number of senior U.S. Politicians. Certain references to newspaper reports were misleading and he regretted that the letter had been delivered in America and published without consultation. The British authorities had known 48 hours before delivery of this letter that the press statement quoted in it did not represent the Taoiseach's position. The report on which Mrs. Thatcher was relying in her letter had been published on Wednesday 22 July and as the Ambassador knew we had told him that press reports previous to those of Friday 24 July should be ignored.

Two days before the letter to the Americans was delivered, the Ambassador had been told that Friday's papers correctly reflected our views, namely that the Irish Government still felt that the British Government should be readier to respond to the I.C.J.P. position. We also felt that the British should make a new presentation, possibly to the wider type of meeting which emerged from discussions with Councillor Canning, based as closely as possible upon the I.C.J.P. - Alison document of 6 July.

The Taoiseach said he found it difficult to see how the British Prime Minister could represent a version of our position to U.S. Politicians and to world opinion which was based on an inaccurate press report. He added that in the context of our efforts to form opinion in the USA this could only be unhelpful. The Thatcher letter was undermining the credibility of the

Government in the USA to the advantage of the IRA and its supporters. If Mrs. Thatcher's version of our position were believed in America by many people, and we must assume that it might be, that would undermine our efforts to counter the IRA and this would have as an after effect the weakening also of the British position in American public opinion.

The Taoiseach said that we had had little response over the past 4 weeks to our repeated efforts to get reasonable minimal movement on the Hunger-Strike. The continuance of the strike was having seriously adverse effects for us. Emotions were being raised by current events. It was against this background that we were faced with the difficulty presented by Mrs. Thatcher's mis representation. We were indeed put in an impossible position. We were tempted to respond vigorously but would be reluctant to do that and intended instead to issue a brief public statement to the effect that we noted the inaccurate representation of our views in the British letter and that we had discussed this and asked the British authorities for clarification. We would also say that we had conveyed our true position to the American recipients of the British letter. We should be glad to know the circumstances in which the British Prime Minister represented our views in the way she did.

The press report cited in the British letter dated from Wednesday last (22 July) was spurious. This had led us to brief the press and as a result a correct report of our position emerged substantially on Friday 24 July. This had been explained to the Ambassador by Professor Dooge on Friday 24 July.

The Minister Designate intervened to reiterate the points made to the Ambassador in this regard on 24 July. Commenting on newspapers published on that date, the Taoiseach said that one paper was not totally accurate in its report but others were correct.

The Taoiseach said he was astonished that the British Prime Minister should give an account of our position as to the accuracy of which the Ambassador was formally on notice that its basis should be disregarded. Three aspects have to be emphasised, firstly, that it was not for one Prime Minister to present publicly the views of another, secondly, that this should not be done on the basis of press reports and thirdly, that this should not be done given the fact that those reports had been specifically repudiated by our Government. A unilateral statement issued without consultation was very unusual, and all the more so since it was based on press reports which two days before had been the subject of an official indication to the Ambassador that they were not reliable. The Taoiseach commented that our relationship with Britain was, as we knew, unique and he had to say that there was certainly something unique about Mrs. Thatcher's approach in this case although not in the sense in which the word had been used up to then.

The Taoiseach said once more that he would be issuing a short statement to the effect that he was seeking clarification from the Ambassador to whom he then gave a copy of the press release (Annex II).

The Ambassador said he was unsighted on this problem. He had only seen the Thatcher letter that morning and had not known that it was coming. It was a new element in the picture as far as he was concerned. Referring to the second paragraph of our draft statement, the Ambassador said that it would clearly cause press interest in his reponse. He could not see what kind of answer would be returned. He felt some anxiety lest the affair would gain a momentum of its own over the next couple of days. He expressed surprise over the contents of Mrs. Thatcher's letter. He suspected that it had been drafted well before we had brought to notice our views about the previous week's press coverage.

The Taoiseach pointed out that even if that were so there had been ample time to intercept the letter. The Ambassador said that if he had known about the letter he could have taken certain action. His telegram had been very fully considered on Friday afternoon but he did not think that the press reporting point could have been picked up. At that stage the Prime Minister's letter had probably been drafted already.

The Taoiseach rejoined that the point was that the letter should have been delivered two days later. A reasonably efficient machinery of Government should have ensured that this could not happen. Over and above all that there still remained the impropriety of representing the Taoiseach's position on the basis of unverified press reports. The Ambassador said that there had been lots of quote marks and inverted commas in the Irish Times. The Minister Designate pointed out that the Irish Times itself had attempted to retrieve the errors made in the report on the following day. The Taoiseach said that the journalist responsible had tried to stop publication. The journalist who wrote the Irish Times piece of 22 July had not been present at the briefing. The Taoiseach really could not imagine how our position could have been described on the basis of unverified press reports. We might have to conclude that we would have to operate in this policy area on our own and by ourselves in future. Nine years' work by our Government in the USA might be undone by this misrepresentation. Our friends in America, who were also the friends of Britain, were unnerved by what had happened. The Taoiseach had done what he could, in explaining matters to the politicians concerned, to undo the damage and had referred in his messages to the Minister Designate's discussions with the Ambassador on 24 July. The Taoiseach did not wish to say any more until he had heard back from the Ambassador. In all fairness however, he had to say that our friends in the USA would wish to know very promptly what our public position is. Our Ambassador in Washington would try to reassure them, but our friends in America might have to say something similar to our brief public statement so as to be able to hold their position against the enemies of both our countries against whom they had been battling for years. The Taoiseach asked if the Ambassador had any idea what reply would be offered. As for us we had the choice of saying everything now or of

holding over until a reply was received and meanwhile trying to calm down the problem. Only after much thought and discussion had it been decided that we could get away with so little by way of public response. The Taoiseach hoped that the British Government could give us some help and would do nothing to exacerbate the issue. However we had been working very hard for four weeks and after all that we felt that we had made no progress whatever. The continuation of the Hunger-Strike was doing terrible damage to our stability and was a boost to the I.R.A.. He felt that stability was at risk. It was difficult to face the IRA when the British Government brought about a situation where we appeared rather to be in conflict with them than with the IRA. The Taoiseach had deferred a statement in the Dáil on 23 July because he believed a solution of the hunger strike to be still possible, but if further deaths were now to occur we would have to come out publicly and say where we stand.

The Ambassador inquired whether we would still be recommending an approach by his authorities based on the ICJP position. The Taoiseach and Minister Designate confirmed that that was so. The Taoiseach said we would try to reorientate public opinion against the IRA but we would not be successful in this until we got things straight with the British Government. Two men were now very serious and it wasn't possible to be hopeful of a settlement in time to prevent their deaths. A general clarification of our position was needed and the tone of that clarification would not be helped if the British authorities behaved towards us as they had done.

The Ambassador said it might be better for relations between our two countries to end public interest now rather than to have the quarrel ongoing with continuing press interest for several days. Perhaps the Irish Government could express itself once and for all now using if necessary very strong language. The Taoiseach remarked that the following day the Royal Wedding would take place and said that it wasn't a time for argument and dispute between the two Governments. The Ambassador said it would be a pity if the press were to know that that consideration was in our minds. He would prefer very strong language now and later private explanation. The Taoiseach repeated that this was.

not the best day for strong language. We hoped to calm down reaction to the Thatcher letter and to head off some of its effects. The Minister Designate said that the arguments in favour of using strong language immediately were weak because of the coincidence of the Royal Wedding.

The Ambassador asked what the reaction of the Four Horsemen had been? The Taoiseach said he had suggested a minimalist form of words for their use. He did not like them to say openly that the British Prime Minister had written an incorrect statement after due notice that it was not correct had been given. It would be undesirable if the Four Horsemen were to use that information in America. The Ambassador confirmed that he had reported fully what he had been told last Friday. He had indicated that press reports during the week should be disregarded in favour of reports in the Irish papers on 24 July. However, he had not focussed on this aspect in his report but had rather focussed on the Financial Times story of 23 July.

The Taoiseach asked what were we to say about a position where a Prime Minister puts words in the mouth of another Prime Minister based on newspaper reports when those reports had been repudiated? How were the Four Horsemen going to explain this situation? We would have to say to them that our position is quite different from what had been stated in Mrs. Thatcher's letter, and that we were demanding a full statement now in Dublin about the unilateral and indefensible character of the misrepresentation of the Taoiseach's views, based on repudiated press reports. It could not help Anglo-American relations. It could not help us to win our common fight in the USA; on the contrary we may lose much support there. A full statement might cloud the atmosphere. The Foreign Minister Designate mentioned that one of Senator Kennedy's aides had asked us to supply material for a public statement.

The Taoiseach said he thought we should have to repeat our position to the British authorities publicly in due course, or we would lose ground to the I.R.A. at home. This would be a particularly unfavourable development as in other respects there had been some good developments in recent days, e.g. the G.A.A. position on the Hunger Strike. However to make a statement showing British misrepresentation would set back Anglo-American relations. Nonetheless silence on our part would cause us to lose out here and in particular would give an opportunity to the relatives of the Hunger-Strikers to criticise the Government and would seriously undermine the position we had established in the U.S.A. in the last nine years. The Minister Designate said it was very embarrassing for us to have to emphasise to the relatives that we were not washing our hands of the matter when they were to read the next day in the papers that the British Prime Minister held the same view as they did of where our Government stood.

The Ambassador said he saw the difficulty and regretted the situation very much. Speaking off the record he made a suggestion which the Taoiseach and Minister Designate said they would consider. The Taoiseach said the problem was basically one of consultation in the first place. The Ambassador agreed. He clarified his earlier remarks by saying that of course he could not welcome the use of strong language by our authorities in commenting on what had happened, but he made this suggestion because he was against allowing the affair to drag on.

The Minister Designate said he did not think the matter need be dragged out excessively. The Ambassador should consider the effect on our friends when they receive a letter which puts our Government in a false position. The problem caused by the letter was arguably even more serious in the U.S.A. than here. The Ambassador commented that our friends in the U.S.A. may have read the misleading account of the Government's position in the Irish Times anyway. The Minister Designate and the Taoiseach both emphasised that repetition of this erroneous account in Mrs. Thatcher's letter could not be defended as we had warned of its incorrectness in time. The Ambassador repeated his point about

the focus of his message of last Friday being on points other than this one about the general unreliability of press reports before 24 July, and indicated that he had nothing to say to the Taoiseach's point about failure to consult with us on our policy position. He left indicating that he would report and pursue the matters raised.

[Handwritten signature]
30/7/1981