

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



Reference Code:	2014/105/826
Creation Date(s):	4 May 1984
Extent and medium:	6 pages
Creator(s):	Department of the Taoiseach
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17 Grosvenor Place

SW1X 7HR

Secret

4th May 1984

Dear Secretary

In the absence of Mr Lillis I am sending to you direct the attached report on my discussion today with Northern Ireland Secretary Mr Prior whom I had asked to see for a discussion of the Forum Report and its aftermath.

In view of its confidential nature I hope to give a copy of this letter and report to the Minister when I see him at London Airport tomorrow (Saturday) on his way back from Washington. In the meantime I am sending you this evening a brief telex to summarise what transpired.

Yours sincerely

Noel Dorr
Ambassador

Mr Sean Donlon
Secretary
Department of Foreign Affairs
Dublin 2

Encl.

London

4 May 1984

Forum Report

Discussion with NI Secretary Mr Prior

1. I took the initiative yesterday in contacting the office of NI Secretary Mr Prior to see if he would see me for a general roundup discussion following the Forum Report and the reactions to it. He agreed readily and he received me in his office this (Friday) morning at 9.30 a.m. He was accompanied by A/Sec Graham Angel and John Lyon who took notes. The discussion lasted about 50 minutes.
2. At the outset I made it clear that I had no specific instructions to see him and no specific message from Dublin to convey. I had simply thought it useful to meet relatively informally to get his assessment of developments in relation to the Report and his view of the future. He appreciated this. The following is a summary account of what emerged.
3. It was plain that Mr Prior had felt some disappointment about various aspects of the Report but he had also tried to put a good face on it and be as helpful as he could in what he said. He said to me that he thought some of the reporting and coverage of his reaction had been oversimplistic in suggesting that he was negative in his attitude.
4. I said, speaking personally, that while there had been some disappointment in Dublin before the statement appeared about the phrase "..(no reason to expect such consent to a change in sovereignty) in any of the three forms suggested in the Report," I thought there was general appreciation in Dublin that he had made an effort to be as positive as possible in his reaction - not only in the statement itself but in radio and TV interviews.
5. He said his disappointment about the Report related particularly to the immediate period ahead as distinct from long-term hopes and aspirations. He had hoped it would contain more that would be helpful in the shorter term. He now had to consider what to do about various matters and he would be undertaking a series of consultations within Northern Ireland in the next week or two - he mentioned that he expected to be seeing John Hume next week. He was happy at least that the Forum Report had now appeared since there had always been the concern while the Forum was still at work that what he said publicly might be seen as "interference".

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6. Mr Prior said that our Minister, Mr Barry, had phoned him earlier in the week and had told him that in such a report there were bound to be things in the historical section which he would not like. Mr Barry however had asked him not to be over-concerned about that. Prior said that he had brought the Report in general terms to Cabinet attention yesterday (Thursday). He mentioned, without labouring the point, that the Prime Minister had been "incensed" at some aspects - particularly the historical section and the blame on the British Government. He, however, echoing to some extent what Mr Barry had said to him, had told her not to worry too much about that and he had "calmed her down." It would, however, in Mr Prior's view now be very important that whatever further reply we may now be preparing to issue in furtherance of the dialogue between us should be carefully couched and in, as he put it, fairly conciliatory terms. This in his view would help to "smooth ruffled feathers".

7. He would also hope that the reply might make a clear distinction between the position of the Irish Government and the positions set out in the Forum Report. I said that I thought the right way to see it would be that the Forum Report was deliberately broad and general in its account of requirements and elements for a framework. It was, as the Taoiseach had said, an "Agenda". I thought it would now be for the two Governments to take the matter further in a dialogue between them and thus to develop - again to use the Taoiseach's words - a "blue-print" for what should be done.

8. This developed into a fairly extensive discussion of how one should see the Forum Report. I emphasised my view that it should be seen as a determined and difficult effort to get agreement among constitutional nationalists on the island in response to the challenge they faced. What was significant was how far forward it had been possible to advance traditional nationalist positions while still maintaining agreement. I said that this should best be seen as an effort to establish a solid base for whatever may now be done but at the same time to keep matters as general as possible so as to allow the necessary flexibility for detailed discussions within the broad limits set. I felt that Mr Prior himself should see it as an advantage for the dialogue which was now beginning between the two Governments that the Forum Report had not tried to deal with the short-term issues, and what was now to be done, in too specific and detailed way.

9. In particular I said that I thought that for me the central statement of the problem and how it should be addressed, on which one might say the whole Report

turns is contained in paragraphs 4.15 and 16. Par 4.15 begins

"The solution to both the historic problem and the current crisis of Northern Ireland and the continuing problem of relations between Ireland and Britain necessarily require new structures that will accommodate together two sets of legitimate rightsetc"

Par 4.16 ends

"Both Governments in cooperation with representatives of democratic nationalist and unionist opinion in Northern Ireland must recognise and discharge their responsibilities"

I said that as I saw it par 4.15 is a broad general formulation of the whole problem; par 4.16 sets out who should address it; and Chapter 5 is a summary of the realities to be taken into account and what will be required, in doing so. I directed his attention in particular to par 5.2 which "proposes" (and the word is I thought, significant) the "necessary elements of a framework" for a settlement. Of course par 5.7 expresses the natural preference of nationalists for a unitary state but I thought that the formulation of the general problem in par 4.15 and the necessary elements of a framework" in 5.2 had to be seen as the essential backbone of the report. They were in my view of even greater importance than the 3 "models" in Chapters 6, 7 and 8. If one looked at the matter in these terms it was an advantage that the report is not specific about the short-term. It is now for Governments to develop their dialogue on specifics and the Report has created a solid, agreed (and substantially advanced) base from which our Government can do just that.

10. Mr Prior seemed to be very interested in this view (and in particular in the point that pars 4.15 and 4.16 contain in broad outline a statement of the whole problem and who should address it while par 5.2 sets out the necessary elements) and he asked Angel to note it.

11. The foregoing is a summary account only of what I felt to be a very useful discussion of how the Forum Report should be seen. I felt - and I hope this is not too much to say - that it helped to fill out and improve somewhat Mr Prior's view of the Report and the basis for serious progress which it offers.

12. As to the dialogue between the two Governments which would build on that general base Mr Prior repeated

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that he hoped our reply would be available soon. He left me with the impression without being very explicit that it would probably be carried forward at this stage at his level.

13. I said that to my own knowledge the issues raised with us some time ago had been discussed several times in substance by Ministers on our side and that when I left Dublin a week ago arrangements were under discussion for broader Cabinet consideration to the extent that that might be necessary. While I did not know exactly what had transpired in the past week, when the Taoiseach and Ministers had been preoccupied with the Forum Report I could assure him that the issues raised were being taken very seriously in Dublin and that the reply which they expected from us would probably come in a matter of weeks rather than months. I added that it was obviously very important to "get it right" since whatever might now be done together would have to be solidly enough based to withstand political - and other - attack. He agreed.

14. I asked him how he saw the timing ahead. He said he would like to be ready to move quickly enough and would hope to bring something to Cabinet within weeks, ("by Whitsun). Mr Prior said that he thought the news media coverage of the Forum report here had been quite good and helpful - especially in the "quality" papers - "even the Times". He thought it especially significant to note what Peter Utley (i.e. Daily Telegraph) had not ruled out. His point was that this kind of comment here makes it easier now politically to push ahead on certain ideas which we will be beginning to discuss between Dublin and London.

15. I asked also about a debate in the House on the Forum Report. He expected that there would certainly be a debate, most probably in Government time and probably after 14th June (i.e. European elections).


16. Mr Prior concluded by suggesting that we should have another detailed discussion between us in about 10 days time. I of course agreed (while allowing for the possibility of seeing him earlier if I were instructed to raise something with him in the interval).

Comment

17. In general the discussion seemed to me to be very useful. I had thought of it beforehand as designed simply to hear Mr Prior's own views. In the event its main usefulness seemed to ~~me~~ to be the chance it gave me to outline to him our views on the function of the Report and its relationship to the inter-Governmental dialogue which may now be beginning.

18. Beyond this I would make the following general points:-

- (a) It is plain that Mrs Thatcher resented some aspects of the Forum Report. Mr Prior feels he has mollified her. He looks to our early reply on certain other issues raised with us and to the way it is couched to help further in this.
- (b) He hopes he will be able to move fairly rapidly on these ideas - probably before July?



Noel Dorr
Ambassador

4th May 1984