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**Reference Code:** 2021/94/22

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Meeting between the Taoiseach and  
British Prime Minister  
London, 26 February, 1992

Overview Note On Northern Ireland Aspects

1. Because of the British general election (probably on April 9th) no major new initiative can be expected at this point. The talks will be mainly exploratory on both sides. The Taoiseach will therefore (a) need to ensure a positive presentation of the meeting and (b) lay down markers for the longer term, (since a new Tory Government after the election seems the likely outcome by a small margin).
  
2. Short term public presentation:
  - This problem does enormous damage to both countries. A solution is long overdue and would be greatly welcomed by both peoples.
  
  - Both Governments are now determined to treat the issue as a priority.
  
  - The Taoiseach and the Prime Minister, building on their excellent personal relations, are now exploring the practical ways they can best give a lead and ensure progress.
  
  - They both remain committed to political dialogue involving the three relationships.
  
  - Both are committed to maintaining the existing high level of security cooperation against terrorism.

- Both are anxious to promote North/South cooperation.
- Both remain committed to the full implementation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, unless and until some new arrangement is agreed to transcend it.
- They will be using the agreed pattern of twice yearly Summit meetings to develop their cooperation in this new spirit.

### Longer Term

3. Probably the real British objective on Northern Ireland is to get the violence "off their backs" and they will judge an Irish Government mainly according to how useful they can be to them in this respect. The British themselves are probably at a loss how to achieve this objective, and open to any idea that promised to deliver results. They probably now accept that repression cannot work (although some maintain it might, if the Irish joined in internment, etc.). They would be fearful that withdrawal could cause chaos through loyalist backlash and social upheaval. They are therefore probably looking at some form of attrition to check the IRA on the security front and, at the same time, give them "carrot and stick" treatment politically, either to persuade them of the futility of violence or force them to a ceasefire. Prime Minister Major will essentially be assessing the Taoiseach's views on future developments and building that assessment into his calculations. In the short term he will want some emphasis on security cooperation and may suggest further official contacts in this area. On the political front, a continuing commitment to the "round-table process" is the easiest holding operation for him, at least until after the election, and he will presumably want this reflected in the presentation. Economic cooperation is seen as a "safe" form of North-South

relations and the British side may suggest a mention of the up-grading of the Belfast-Dublin rail link. He will be anxious to have a sense of the Taoiseach's preferences after the election (resumed round-table talks, different arrangements?) and his ideas on a long-term solution (status quo, Irish unity, some new mixed model?).

4. Points the Taoiseach might wish to make to Mr. Major:
- (1) We must not let another generation experience a further 3,000 deaths: A solution is long overdue.
  - (2) There must be a practical way of resolving the problem if we devote enough energy, resources and leadership to it.
  - (3) Cooperation between the two Governments is essential. We must of course maintain and fully work the Anglo-Irish Agreement unless and until something better is agreed which would transcend it.
  - (4) A "deal" by either party to buy Unionist votes in a hung parliament would have a disastrous effect on public opinion in Ireland, and indeed internationally.
  - (5) We accept that political dialogue in Ireland is essential and the Brooke talks established a welcome acceptance by all parties that it should reflect the three key relationships.
  - (6) However, a weakness of the Brooke approach was that the process had no clear objective, while the emphasis on Unionist agreement at every step made people fear that it was giving back to the Unionists the veto on political movement they had lost through the Agreement.

- (7) It might be preferable for the Governments to work out their joint objectives first and to use the talks process to persuade the parties to accept and support these.
- (8) We feel there are new factors which help the search for a solution, e.g., the growing sense of the futility of violence, developments in Europe which offer new and as yet untainted options for both sides. We must build on these.
- (9) A new and imaginative approach to balance the interests of both traditions in Ireland (and which might even be approved in popular referenda) would probably stand a better chance of "taking the trick" than any attempt at marginal or piece-meal adjustments of the status quo. We would be prepared to take risks if we felt the basis was right.
- (10) Our officials might be asked to draw up, on an internal and strictly confidential basis, a menu of options we could look at at our next meeting.

February, 1992

Broad lines suggested for Taoiseach's remarks  
with Prime Minister Major in Downing Street

- This early meeting reflects the importance we both attach to Anglo-Irish relations.

- We are both appalled at the terrible human costs of the Northern Ireland problem and know both our peoples would dearly wish to see a solution. We both want to examine what practical steps we can take together to achieve that.

- The present close cooperation in all fields between the two Governments, as reflected in our joint commitment to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, is a solid foundation. Our challenge now is to build on that.

- We had a most valuable exchange of views this evening, and will now be continuing our discussion with our Ministers.

- Already I can say I am greatly encouraged by Prime Minister Major's personal concern and interest and the high priority he attaches to the problem.

- It is of course a top priority for my Government also.

- I feel confident that the two Governments can give fresh impetus and a renewed sense of purpose and leadership to the search for progress. The necessary commitment and goodwill is there on both sides to enable us to achieve it.

## Political developments

### Background Note

1. Over the past two years, efforts have been made to launch round-table talks between the Irish and British Governments and the political parties in Northern Ireland. The terms of an agreed basis for such talks were announced on 26 March 1991. The talks, organised in three 'strands', were to address the three key relationships: within Northern Ireland, North/South and between Ireland and Britain.

2 After protracted procedural disputes, substantive talks in Strand One took place for a period of three weeks last summer. The parties exchanged analyses of the underlying problems and realities and some common ground was identified. On 3 July, however, they were brought to an end as a result of Unionist insistence that, because of the short time remaining within the period agreed for talks, the Conference meeting scheduled for 16 July should not go ahead.

3. Efforts were made over the December/January period to revive the process. However, they came to nothing and were formally abandoned at a meeting between the party leaders and the Secretary of State on 27 January and at a meeting of the Anglo-Irish Conference on the following day. The stumbling-block was a Unionist stipulation that they would reserve their position on a continuation of talks after the British election in the event of a Labour Government coming to power.

4. However, a positively worded statement following the meeting on 27 January left the door open for further contacts on matters of common concern, "including in the economic field", during the pre-election period and held out hopes for



a resumption of the process "in due course".

5. The prospects for political progress were discussed at a meeting on 11 February to which the Prime Minister invited the party leaders. John Hume asked that the parties renew their efforts to overcome the remaining obstacle. Jim Molyneaux agreed to this and suggested a separate meeting for this purpose. The Prime Minister therefore announced after the meeting that the party leaders had agreed that they would meet "to discuss obstacles in the way of further political dialogue in the hope that that political dialogue might be able to recommence at an early date". He also indicated that he himself would see the party leaders again.

6. A date is currently being arranged for the party leaders' own meeting. Hume is privately doubtful, however, that it will succeed in resolving the difficulty. It is also clear that, with speculation about the election date focussing increasingly on 9 April (with an announcement expected in mid-March), the window of opportunity for talks prior to the election is rapidly closing.

7. The prospect of an agreement on fresh talks emerging in advance of the election is, therefore, remote. However, the relatively constructive remarks made in public by the Unionist leaders about the prospects for the process augur well for the success of future contacts. The agreement to meet together on various issues during the pre-election period, with or without the Secretary of State, indicates an underlying openness to dialogue and suggests that an atmosphere exists at present between the parties which is conducive to a post-election agreement on a basis for fresh talks.

8. It was also agreed on 27 January that the British Government would offer the parties factual briefings on the present financial and other administrative arrangements



affecting the people of Northern Ireland. The first such briefing was chaired by Dr Mawhinney, Minister of State at the NIO, on Monday of this week.

9. The most encouraging element at present is the evidence that the Prime Minister is taking an increased interest in the problems of Northern Ireland and is giving them a higher priority than in the past. The meeting to which the Prime Minister invited the party leaders on 11 February was the first such meeting since 1976 and it ended with an indication that it might shortly be repeated. The Prime Minister has also made clear in public on several occasions that he is looking forward to close cooperation with the Taoiseach. (On 20 February, replying to a PQ in the Commons, he said that "we must wait and see what his (the Taoiseach's) detailed policies are going to be but, from everything that I have seen and heard, he is certainly very understanding of the situation in Northern Ireland"). Full personal commitment on the part of the British Prime Minister will be essential to the success of any efforts to secure political progress in the period following the British election.

10. A major element of uncertainty in predicting post-election developments is, of course, the extent to which a future British administration, whether Conservative or Labour, may be dependent on Unionist support. The SDLP reacted with considerable irritation to reports of preliminary Tory/Unionist contacts to discuss the "hung Parliament" scenario. Their suspicions have also been aroused by remarks made by the Secretary of State which did not explicitly rule out cooperation in that context. Previous experience has also taught them not to place complete faith in the Labour Party in this regard.

Anglo-Irish Division  
February 1992