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British Embassy
Dublin

1 April 1992

Mr David Andrews TD
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Iveagh House
DUBLIN

1 APR 1992

Dear Minister

I enclose the text of a letter from Mr Peter Brooke, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, which I have been asked to pass to you. The signed original will follow.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely

David Blatherwick

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SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND

Mr D Andrews TD
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Iveagh House
Dublin

1st April 1992

Dear David,

It was good to see you again on 6 March for what was, I thought, a thoroughly constructive conference.

You will already have received a briefing from the Secretariat about how the talks went on 9 March so I shall not need to go into the detail again here. I think it is worth emphasising, however, that there appeared general satisfaction that the process was once again under way; and, for my part, I detected no hint that the parties lacked determination to push forward with vigour. Because of the expectation that our general election was about to be announced, there was no interest in starting on matters of substance but everyone saw the meeting as a valuable opportunity to put the structural arrangements in good order so that all could get down to substantive issues immediately after the election. Some sensible agreements were reached of which you will have been told.

Apart from structural questions about the Business Committee and the appointment of sub-committees, the main issues we discussed were the likely time-table after the election and the nature of the arrangements for a new gap. I thought it would help if I wrote to you about these issues before our general election takes place, to see whether we can reach agreement on them, as I am



sure that it would help an incoming British Government, whatever its complexion, if these issues had already been settled between us now. It would also help to ensure a prompt re-start after the election. In this context, you will have noticed Kevin McNamara's remarks during the Northern Ireland debate on 5 March, now re-echoed in their Manifesto, that a Labour administration would pick up the talks on the same basis as they had been left by the present Government, honouring any agreements previously reached.

On 9 March there was general agreement amongst the parties that, on the assumption that the election was to be held on 9 April we might hope for the talks to recommence during the week beginning Monday 27 April. As you will surmise, this presupposes an IGC on, say, 23 or 24 April to launch the new gap. Although it was acknowledged that this would not allow much time for the two Governments to prepare after the election, there was a general feeling that it was important to take maximum advantage of the collective desire to get back into full talks as soon as possible. And, of course, there was a recognition that the sooner we could get started, the greater the possibility of a reasonable gap.

During the discussions I tested the proposition that if we started at the end of April, July would be a probable end date (my thinking here was that the Unionists would be pre-occupied during the July fortnight, and it is also difficult to get people together in August). The Unionists, however, discounted the need to worry about the July fortnight. They regarded July as a working month for politicians, saying that we should all be prepared to work into August if that was the only way to get the work done. In effect, they rejected the idea of using the



holiday period as a mechanism for creating a 'gap within the gap', as we have with the general election. In the light of last year's experience, they were also anxious to avoid being boxed in by a fixed date for a Conference. However, although they wanted some flexibility in the arrangements, they remained anxious to avoid an open-ended gap and showed no interest at this stage in contemplating a process stretching beyond August. They also made it clear that they regarded part of any gap in July as being for the two Governments to use for Strand 3 discussions. They repeated more than once that there was as much of an onus on the two Governments to press ahead with all speed, as there was on the parties. The SDLP seemed however, less enthusiastic about working into late July and August, and argued that, as we have negotiated gaps before, we could no doubt negotiate another in the autumn if more time were genuinely needed in the light of progress made.

The gap was also discussed in the Business Committee as well as the plenary meetings. There was agreement there that the talks could go on until the middle of August if necessary, but only as a last resort. There was a preference for a provisional ending in July. There was also unanimous agreement to a formula whereby the two Governments would be free to defer the IGC if, in the light of progress in the talks, that seemed necessary and desirable, and had the support of the four party leaders.

All these points taken together seem to me to contain the seeds of an acceptable arrangement. If you were content to have a Conference on 23 or 24 April to launch the gap, I would like to suggest that it also announced that there would be no further meetings before the end of July - we might even offer a date if you wish. I also believe, however, there would be considerable advantage in that Conference also making clear that the two



governments would, in the right circumstances, contemplate extending the gap. If we do this from the outset, we should avoid the situation we found ourselves in last Summer where, even if we had wanted to extend the gap, it would have been difficult to do so without seeming to put our fidelity to the Agreement at issue. I believe therefore we should adopt the suggestion commended by the Business Committee: namely that it would be open to the two Government to defer the IGC if, in the light of progress in the talks, that seemed necessary and desirable and had the support of the four party leaders. One should not forget, in this context, that deferring a Conference would not preclude another Summit over the summer months.

I should be grateful for your reactions to these proposals. If it would be helpful, I should be glad to ask my officials to talk this through with yours before the election. As I say, I think it would be a great service to any incoming government on our side to have this sorted out. I should also like to minimise the risk of the two governments being criticised for holding things up after the election, when we still have time to think about these issues now.

*James
Pain*

FB