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Note of Meeting between the Taoiseach and a delegation from the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.
18 February, 1993

1. The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, The Rev. John Dunlop, was accompanied by the Rev. Godfrey Browne (a former Moderator), the Rev. Samuel Hutchinson (Clerk of the General Assembly) and Mr. Alan Martin. The Taoiseach was accompanied by Secretary Dorr and the undersigned. The meeting lasted about an hour.
2. After the initial courtesies Dr. Dunlop recalled that he had been part of an inter-Church delegation to the United States. The Churchmen had sought to underline the diversity of Ireland, which had a 25% Protestant minority. They had indicated that an approach by the US Government would be welcome, provided it were sensitively handled and not solely in a nationalist perspective. Dr. Dunlop said that now Unionists were much more aware of their minority status in Ireland as a whole. That was a source of mistrust and anxiety. There was a serious need for confidence-building measures both inside Northern Ireland and between North and South. It was important for all spokespersons to realise their words were heard in both communities. The siege mentality was deeply embedded on the unionist side. They felt the problems of nationalists were widely understood, whereas those of the unionist community were not.
3. Dr. Dunlop referred to the self-segregation process taking place in many communities, such as North Belfast and the border regions. A number of these communities were reaching the "point of tilt" where Presbyterians began to move out and the renewal of the Presbyterian community became impossible. He instanced the shift from the West Bank of Derry and the fact that the Protestant population in Strabane had dropped from 30% to 3%. Protestants looked at

the decline of the Protestant population in the Republic. The continued inability of the two Governments to deal with IRA terrorism through the judicial process was causing a loss of people's confidence in the capacity of the state to protect them. The IRA strategy was being emulated on the Loyalist side.

4. The Tánaiste said there was little he could disagree with in the very pessimistic analysis given by Dr. Dunlop. The Irish Government was anxious to engage in confidence-building measures but could get no political response from the Unionist community. He had been accused of representing "North Kerry Republicanism" although no speech or remark he had ever made would support that allegation. He felt every additional killing was carrying the bitterness over to another generation. The Irish Government could not stand back, but when they tried to help they were rebuffed. Unionists would have to realise that they too had a role to play. The Tánaiste stressed that he was anxious to help. He had not found a solution, but he would gladly call on any help he could get in that respect. As regards the position of the South, he stressed that the whole theme of the last election was that of change.

5. Dr. Dunlop said it would be helpful if there were expressions of sympathy from the South for security personnel killed in the line of duty. These victims were mostly trying to serve the community, although the RUC and the UDR etc. were often presented as bigots. (Dr. Dunlop illustrated the devastating impact of these murders on protestant communities. He recalled a Presbyterian Clergyman who had received a call to a congregation in South Down and was told that he might accept but that his son, in the RUC, could never visit him there). Words from Dublin which showed an understanding for this problem would be most

useful. The criticisms were heard but not words of sympathy.

6. Dr. Browne recalled the growing sensitivity which now prevails in inter-Church relations. The Rev. Mr. Hutchinson recalled that there was a group of four clergy in Belfast who cleared each Church's statements for sensitivity to the concerns of the other Churches. Words and actions had often unintended effects. He recalled the Stevens enquiry into collusion had resulted in a more ruthless loyalist paramilitary leadership.

7. The Tánaiste asked how he could communicate with the unionist community. It was proving difficult for him, apart from some personal friends from TCD days. Dr. Dunlop said that the Church had invested great capital in the political Talks. The prospect of local Government elections need not produce total stalemate. Even if Molyneaux and Paisley did not take part, the second level people could be spoken to. It was interesting to see that Molyneaux had involved the most liberal and conciliatory wing of the UUP in the Talks. His motivation might have been devious, but he (Dr. Dunlop) believed it was based on a genuine desire to make progress. If nationalists could not negotiate a deal with people like Maginnis and Empey, then no deal was possible. The perception was that the Irish Government had been less than flexible in the last talks. That perception meant that the Tánaiste in a sense began from a minus position. The unionist perception was that a genuine attempt to reach an accommodation had not been met by the SDLP. An SDLP contact had said to him, ominously, that if agreement was not possible now "we'll wait". Unionists had the impression that the asking price for a settlement was being raised each time they went back to the table. There appeared to be ideological solidarity between the Irish Government and the SDLP whereas the Presbyterian ethos was public debate and,

if necessary, public disagreement. The British Government commitment to majority decision was, he believed, solid but they were ideologically neutral on the union. The intensity of the nationalist aspiration to a united Ireland was not matched by a British commitment to the United Kingdom and that increased the sense of uncertainty. He believed the unionist position in the 1920s was not motivated by the protection of privilege, but by fear of Catholic Ireland. The political process could not be driven by nationalist concerns alone. If the political parameters were to avoid provoking "sleeping republicanism" in the South, and to protect the flank of the SDLP from Sinn Fein, then only the unionists were to be "stressed" in the process of change. That was a dangerous strategy. It led Loyalists to believe that the SDLP were ultimately the beneficiaries of the IRA campaign of violence and inspired that community to resort to similar tactics on its own side.

8. The Tánaiste stressed the Government's concern at violence from whatever side and the enormously improved relationship between the security forces on both sides of the border. He was most anxious to get into the hearts and minds of unionists to offer as much reassurance as possible. The crux was to find structures which accommodated difference. Political cooperation was needed. One had to tread wearily on constitutional issues. Failure of a referendum would cause a loss of confidence both in the South and in North-South relations. He was determined to work day and night for progress, but one side of the equation was still missing, that was the unionist community.

9. The Rev. Mr. Hutchinson said that unionist leadership tended to be "an unruly horse" which threw its riders. There was a sense of optimism about fresh personalities. President Robinson had, through her demeanour, preserved the great initial goodwill which a few mistaken speeches would have lost.

10. Dr. Dunlop said he wished to put on record that although they had concentrated on the unionist position, they were also sensitive to nationalist concerns and had tried to encourage that attitude in their own community. They had for example met with Mr. Hume before the political talks.

11. The Tánaiste said that progress in inter-Church and ecumenical contacts was an important factor. Attitudes in the South on these matters were much healthier than a generation ago. Dr. Dunlop agreed and said it would be useful if more Northerners were aware of that. Dr. Dunlop said the Church did not wish to get involved in suggesting where the lines of political compromise should fall. That was a matter for the politicians. He acknowledged also there was a "anti-Roman" element in Protestant attitudes which complicated matters.

12. The Tánaiste expressed appreciation for the remarks about President Robinson. He stressed again the symbolism of a united Christian front in addressing the problem. He hoped that a pattern of small contacts and personal roles could add up to a change in attitudes overall. He thanked the delegation warmly for sharing their views with him and undertook to reflect on them.

13. Mr. Martin at the conclusion of the meeting stressed also the importance of the unemployment issue. A jobs initiative should be a priority. The Tanaiste said that they had now successfully put the question of unemployment on the European agenda. The problem could not be solved internally. The troubles in Northern Ireland were of course a liability in this respect also.

14. The meeting then concluded.

Seán O hUiginn
19 February, 1993