

Sir Ewart Bell



Poc 15

Oifig an Taoisigh
Office of the Taoiseach

27 April, 1984

Dear Margaret,

The work of the New Ireland Forum was virtually completed today. It remains for a final meeting of the Leaders on Monday to deal with a couple of outstanding points and for a Plenary session of the Forum to confirm the text which has been effectively agreed by the Party Leaders. I am reasonably confident that no substantive changes will be made in the enclosed text. It is now agreed that the Report will be published next Wednesday afternoon.

I felt it important that you should have a copy of an advance text of the Report in virtually final form as far in advance of the date of publication as possible. I am accordingly sending you, on a strictly confidential basis, the attached text, which cannot of course be described as the Report of the Forum. That will not exist until it has been adopted formally by the Forum.

Copies of this text are also being transmitted to Geoffrey Howe and Jim Prior.

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I believe that the Report is an important event in the political development of this State and for our relations with you and indeed with Northern Ireland. I believe that it marks a consolidation by the four main voices of constitutional nationalism in Ireland, speaking together, of important principles which we hold in common with you, and moreover, that it marks a seminal advance in the acceptance by Irish nationalism of the rights and the ethos of the Unionists of Northern Ireland.

As to the first, the evil of violence is condemned in trenchant terms at a number of points in the document although I feel I hardly need to direct your attention to this since you already know how strongly violence has always been repudiated by successive Irish Governments and constitutional politicians in Ireland.

As to the second, I believe that the parties in the Forum have brought constitutional nationalism very far forward in two particular ways: firstly, by acknowledging the rights and the identity of Unionists in a way in which nationalists have hitherto not done and, secondly, in making it clear that we are open to ideas other than what, in the carefully chosen words of the Report, nationalists "would wish to see", which is, of course, a unitary Irish state. Some of these ideas are to be found in Chapters 7 and 8.

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As we both know, of course, there have always been fundamental differences between the historical assumptions and perceptions of Irish nationalism and the view of British Governments about some of the most difficult issues in the relationship between our two islands during this century.

It is natural therefore that when the leaders of constitutional Irish nationalism speak with one voice of the problem of Northern Ireland, as they do in this Report, they would take as their point of departure their belief that the decision to divide this island sixty years ago was a tragic mistake.

I believe that there is merit in being open in stating our view about the history and origin of the problem and that it was and is necessary to do so in order to maintain the credibility of constitutional democratic politics in this island at a time when it is under threat from men of violence who seek to discredit it and whose aims and methods we both abhor and repudiate.

I know you may not share our view of the origin of the problem nor, indeed, our perspective on the events of the past sixty years. But I am deeply concerned to ensure that the possibility of serious dialogue and close cooperation between us, which I know we both

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very much want to develop, is strengthened, rather than diminished, by the appearance of the Report and the follow-up to it.

With this in mind, I would suggest to you, and I hope you will share my view on this, that particular importance should be attached to the formal acknowledgement for the first time by constitutional Irish nationalism that Unionists in Northern Ireland "regard themselves as being British, the inheritors of a specific communal loyalty to the Crown", with a right as a community to effective political, symbolic and administrative expression of their identity and ethos (Chapter 4.8, 4.10, 4.11 and 4.18). This is a dramatic advance on the traditional nationalist view, which in focussing on the aspiration to unity of a majority in the island has always tended to underestimate or ignore the reality of the Unionist ethos and the strength of their feelings on this point.

What I see as being potentially the operational part of the Report, on which I hope we can build together, is the statement of Realities and Requirements in Chapter 5 - paragraphs 1 and 2. The statements in these two sections taken together can be seen as comprising a new and, I believe, more realistic statement of the position of constitutional Irish nationalism. I think it is particularly important and helpful that not alone our two parties in government but the main
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opposition party here and the SDLP in Northern Ireland have formally subscribed to and endorsed these "Realities" and "Requirements". It is also, I think, of major importance that all four of the parties which participated in the Forum, while stating their preference as an ideal for a united Ireland to be achieved peacefully and by agreement, have committed themselves fully to the concept that this could be achieved only through agreement and consent - a principle reiterated in almost every paragraph of Chapter 5.

Finally, I would add that it has not been easy to bring all our partners with us in this and, as a politician, you will, I know, appreciate that, in order to make this progress, it has been necessary to stress in the earlier chapters the beliefs and hopes which are the inheritance of Irish nationalists, and which, inevitably, will be seen in a different perspective in Britain and by Northern Unionists.

It is my firm hope that you will be able to see, as I do, the real merit of this unusual exercise and, in particular, the fact that it creates a solid and realistic basis for any action we might contemplate in the future.

The Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher M.P.,
Prime Minister.

Best wishes

*Yours
Janet M. Jewell*

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