

PUS/L/86/2/MLR

Mr Bloomfield

cc Mr Brennan
Mr A W StephensTHE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT 1985

Thank you for your minute of 20 December, which I am taking the liberty of copying to Mr Brennan and Mr Stephens. My own reactions on reading Sir Alan Goodison's despatch were very similar to your own. Indeed, I spoke to Sir Robert Armstrong and told him that I thought it was unduly complacent and that I might want to write a letter putting on record the fact that, seen from Northern Ireland, the situation looked rather different. I now attach a draft letter which draws on your minute. I should be grateful for your comments and those of Mr Brennan and Mr Stephens.

2 January 1986


R J ANDREW

Encl

DRAFT LETTER FROM PUS TO SIR ROBERT ARMSTRONG

THE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT 1985

I have read with much interest Alan Goodison's despatch, dated 13 December 1985. As I would have expected, it is a lucid and elegant piece of work which provides a useful historical record of the negotiations leading up to the signature of the Agreement. And yet, seen from the Northern Ireland Office, some parts of it appear bland to the point of complacency. I say this not in criticism of Alan's account of events, which I am sure is an accurate record of the way they appear from Dublin, but rather to point out once again the fact that things look very different from Belfast, where the reception accorded to the Agreement contrasted starkly with the welcome it received elsewhere. Seen from Belfast the prospect looks a good deal less rosy than from Dublin.

Alan's opening summary refers to the Agreement being "well received as offering the prospect of better Anglo-Irish relations and the opportunity for peace, stability and reconciliation in Northern Ireland." In the body of the despatch this is amplified: "the Agreement brought forth a surely unprecedented volume of supportive statements from capitals all round the world, but in particular from the Governments of partner states in Europe and from the President and Congress of the United States of America." No mention of the reception in Northern Ireland,

which was a very different story! There the rejection by the majority community was total, embracing Unionist politicians, Protestant church leaders, newspaper editors and shopfloor workers. Over 100,000 people demonstrated against the Agreement in front of the Belfast City Hall. This immediate reaction has been followed by resignation of parliamentary seats, withdrawal from public bodies, more violent protests and threats of non-constitutional action if the British Government persist with the Agreement against the clear wishes of the majority as expressed in the by-elections. By comparison, support for the Agreement amongst the nationalist minority has been muted, more people preferring to wait and see what changes it brings, before committing themselves. There is no sign that the Agreement will make it easier to achieve devolution - rather the reverse.

Of course, we realised when we were negotiating the Agreement that it would get a hostile reception from the Unionists, and that any attempt to give the Irish Government even a limited role in the North would be denounced as a treacherous sell-out to Dublin and the first step towards a United Ireland. We must hope that in the longer term more moderate elements among the Unionists will recognise that the Agreement has not had the dire consequences foretold by their leaders and has even produced advantages, eg in terms of improved cross-border security co-operation. But meanwhile it does no good to ignore the depth of feeling against the Agreement and the

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very real fears of even moderate people in Northern Ireland. Dr FitzGerald's "unusual willingness to take account of Unionist sensitivities", and the Irish making it clear "that they were not going to ignore Unionist interests, nor, what was vital to us, Unionist wishes", would ring hollow to Unionists in Belfast who see little evidence that their wishes and sensitivities were taken into account in the negotiation of an Agreement on which they were not even consulted and which they have almost unanimously denounced.

I suppose that differences in perception between Belfast on the one hand and Dublin (and London) on the other are to be expected. Indeed, they were apparent during the negotiations when the NIO representatives were often thought by the Irish (and sometimes by our own colleagues) to be making difficulties because we were concerned that the alienation of the minority should not be replaced by the alienation of the majority. From the point of view of the FCO and the Cabinet Office the Agreement was rightly seen as a great prize; and as Alan's despatch records that prize has been won. But the NIO was throughout more concerned with the way in which the Agreement would work out in practice; whether it was going to achieve the desired effect of changing nationalist attitudes to the apparatus of government and the security forces; whether it would provoke such hostility from the unionists that it would create instability rather than

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stability; and whether the addition of a fifth Irish wheel to the governmental coach would render the vehicle unmanageable. Our final judgement was that the pros and cons were finely balanced (my Secretary of State's minute to the Prime Minister of 27 September) but that the consequences of not signing the Agreement would probably be worse than the risks involved in signing it.

I have thought it worth rehearsing all this because I do not want there to be any feeling of euphoria about the Agreement. It is a carefully balanced document, which owes much to your own drafting skill; but there was some papering over of cracks, and some of them have shown signs of opening up in the first two meetings of the Intergovernmental Conference, when the differing objectives of the two governments have become very plain. The signing of the Agreement after such lengthy negotiation was a landmark; but the task of implementing it is only just beginning and all the indications are that it is going to be a difficult one. As the New Year opens, with more murders of policemen, the Spearhead Battalion flying in and a hunger strike underway in the Maze prison, the scene in Northern Ireland looks sombre. We shall all do our best to make the Agreement work, but there is rough water ahead and I would not wish Ministers in Whitehall or Heads of Mission in Washington and Europe - let alone our representatives in Kinshasa, Sana'a and Caracas - to be under any illusions about the realities of the situation.

I am sending copies of this letter to Alan Goodison and David Goodall.