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Foreign and Commonwealth Office  
N.I.O. LONDON  
London SW1A 2AH

22 September 1986

Sir Robert Andrew KCB  
Northern Ireland Office

*Dear Robert,*

JOHN HUME AND THE UNIONISTS

1. As I found myself sitting next to John Hume at dinner on 20 September during the BIA Conference at Christ Church, I took the opportunity of asking him whether his "unconditional" offer to sit down with the unionists and discuss future devolution arrangements in Northern Ireland had been put to them formally and in writing. Hume at first said that he saw no need for this; his offer had been made publicly and repeatedly; he did not like the technique of writing to someone and then publishing the letter; and in any case the unionists had not got their act together sufficiently for there to be any prospect of them responding positively. He acknowledged that Mr King had asked him to put the offer in writing, but indicated that he had not so far thought it necessary to do so.
2. I said that the main point of writing would not be to bring the unionists to the negotiating table (for which I agreed that they were unlikely to be ready just yet) but to demonstrate to all concerned that the offer was a real one and not just a piece of platform rhetoric. Whether or not the letter was published was of secondary importance; what mattered was that it would become publicly known that he had written such a letter. The fact that he had failed so far to commit himself on paper was seen, and was bound to be seen, as casting doubt on the seriousness of his offer. To my surprise, John Hume said that he could see that this was a valid point. Nor did he want Mr King to be in any doubt that he meant what he said. He saw no real difficulty about putting the offer into a formal letter; he would now do so, and would send a copy to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Later in the evening he again confirmed that he would write a letter in the sense we had discussed.
3. Perhaps you or your Secretary of State also spoke to him along the same lines. At all events he seemed to have got the message. It now remains to be seen whether he will really act on it.
4. In the light of his contribution to the plenary discussion during the afternoon, I also asked John Hume to explain precisely how he saw the importance of the "Irish dimension" or "Dublin link" in the context of possible future arrangements for a devolved, power-sharing administration in Northern Ireland;

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his remarks had seemed to suggest that the Dublin link, which was the focus of unionist hostility, might be less central to SDLP concerns than we had hitherto supposed. Hume said that the Irish dimension had been, and for the moment continued to be, of critical importance in securing nationalist support for the Hillsborough Agreement and in establishing to their satisfaction that there had been a sea change for the better in the British Government's attitude to nationalists. But he went on to say that there was in his view absolutely no prospect of bringing Northern Ireland into a united Ireland, nor was that his objective. He believed that, if power-sharing arrangements of some kind could be established in Northern Ireland, the SDLP would be able to deal with the unionists on equal terms and the Dublin link would become unnecessary. The introduction of a devolved administration on a power-sharing basis plus the other improvements foreshadowed in the Agreement would of themselves, over time, bring about a comprehensive and radical change in the climate in Northern Ireland and in relations between the two communities there. In the course of that process, there would be corresponding adjustments in the relationships between North and South (and between the two parts of Ireland and Great Britain) which could not yet be identified or predicted. In short, he saw the Dublin link as an important but not necessarily permanent feature of what he hoped and believed would be an evolutionary process. The end result of that process would certainly not be a united Ireland in the traditional sense but a whole series of new relationships between the component parts of the British Isles. At this stage of the political game, however, it was not possible for him to do more than hint at the eventual dispensability of the Dublin link in fairly Delphic terms.

5. I dare say all this is familiar to you from your own contacts with Hume. But I found it an interesting and in many respects encouraging account of his thinking and worth recording for that reason. Since he was clearly speaking personally and on a privileged occasion, I should be grateful if his confidence could be respected.

6. I am sending a copy of this letter to Robert Armstrong.

*Yours ever*

*David*

A D S Goodall

cc:- Sir R Armstrong GCB CVO (Cabinet Office)