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11. March 1987

PS/MR BLOOMFIELD

MR BURNS

MR CHESTERTON

MR ELLIOTT

MR KIRK

MR MCCONNELL

MR WOOD

MR BELL



Dear Charles,

Thank you for your letters of 5 and 6 March about the approach from Mr Molyneaux about a possible meeting between himself and Dr Paisley and the Prime Minister. Mr King hopes that the Prime Minister will agree to this meeting (though he notes that Mr Molyneaux is now delaying his request for a little while), in the hopes of generating more positive discussion between the Unionist leaders and Government.

The present approach from Mr Molyneaux and Dr Paisley was hinted at when they met Sir Robert Andrew just over a fortnight ago. At that stage they had apparently not made up their minds exactly how to pursue their campaign against the Anglo-Irish Agreement; but they were contemplating seeking a meeting with the Prime Minister to emphasise the continuing opposition of the majority community in Northern Ireland to the Agreement, as demonstrated by the 400,000 signatures on the referendum petition, and to argue that the advent of Mr Haughey had created a new situation, since his opposition to Article 1 and his views on extradition had undermined the Agreement. In this situation the Unionist leaders contended that the right thing for the Prime Minister to do would be to sit down with the leaders of the Northern Ireland parties (in the first instance the Unionist parties alone) to consider a replacement for the Agreement. Mr Molyneaux floated the idea of a short meeting at the House of Commons at which the Unionist leaders would hand over a piece of paper setting out their ideas in detail, since he evidently feared that a more formal and substantive meeting at No 10 might result in a confrontation, with damaging publicity.

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It is clear from subsequent statements that the Unionists leaders remain unwilling to accept the fact of the Agreement and seek a way forward from there: they still believe that the Agreement can be brought down and see Mr Haughey as a means of securing this. In fact, their campaign of opposition has so far had little effect on government and has served only to highlight the divisions within the Unionist ranks. Our rejection of the request for a referendum has caused Dr Paisley in particular to renew demands for a campaign of civil disobedience to demonstrate withdrawal of consent. Although Mr Molyneaux still maintains his opposition to the Agreement he seems to be finding the alliance with the DUP increasingly uncomfortable. His letter to the Secretary of State on the referendum (copy attached) repeats that there can be no dialogue while the Agreement subsists. But the careful drafting - in which we detect the hand of Mr Powell - may be intended to leave some loopholes. The fact that Mr Molyneaux and Dr Paisley are seeking a meeting with the Prime Minister may be counted as a modest step forward even if, in the light of the embattled statements following the rejection of the referendum, the meeting has had to be postponed. It is also relevant that Mr Molyneaux (supported by Mr Powell) has recently been considering discussions with the Secretary of State about changes in parliamentary procedure. In the end Mr Molyneaux's nerve failed; but the fact that he was willing to contemplate this suggests that he, at least is ready to explore the possibility of making some progress.

Against this background Mr King hopes that the Prime Minister will be willing to see Dr Paisley and Mr Molyneaux when they are ready; and, as you suggest, he would wish to be present. It does not seem to be the Unionists' intention at the meeting to do much more than hand over a document, without initiating a substantive discussion. Until we see the document it is difficult to advise on whether the Prime Minister should simply promise to study it or make some immediate comment. It seems likely that the document will include quotations from Mr Haughey designed to prove that he has dissociated himself from Article 1 of the Agreement and that this has created a new situation in which the Agreement can be set aside and something else put in its place. It may be that by the time the meeting takes place Mr Haughey will have been persuaded to make some statement endorsing the Agreement entered into by his predecessor. In any case, the Prime Minister may want to take the opportunity to leave the Unionists in no doubt about the British Government's continuing commitment to the Agreement. It may be that some plain speaking would dispel the Unionists' wishful thinking (which almost certainly

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extends to the hope that a hung Parliament at Westminster after a general election will put them in a position to exert political leverage). But, having got the Unionists to the point of re-starting a dialogue, it would seem desirable, if possible, to draw them into a continuing discussion, possibly by offering another meeting when there has been time to study their document.

Mr King will look forward to discussing these issues with the Prime Minister on Thursday.

Yours sincerely,

David Watkins.

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