

British Embassy

Dublin

14 November 1986

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP  
Secretary of State for the  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office  
London SW1

Sir

A FAREWELL FROM DUBLIN: THE FUTURE OF THE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT

1. The Chinese are said to regard interesting times as a curse. I count myself privileged to have served The Queen, and The King before Her, in interesting times. In 1948, I watched the war in Palestine after the British withdrawal. I assisted Libya and the Sudan towards precarious independence. I tried to calm German fears as the Prague Spring was overthrown. I advised your predecessor as the dictatorships in Portugal, Spain and Greece were swept away, and as Cyprus was partitioned. It was I who told the Political Directors of the Ten in advance that if we met a major unit of the Argentine Navy we should sink it. And I have participated in the negotiation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, 1985.
2. The British Ambassador in Dublin has a complex position to maintain. As in many countries, and as in all those once ruled from London, the representative of Her Majesty reflects a dominant image, admired, envied, and sometimes reviled. In St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, he sits on a gilt chair in his own pew (formerly the Lord Lieutenant's, still decorated with the Royal Arms); in the mythology of Republicans he represents a hated oppressor whose security forces still control what a distinguished Professor of Law at Trinity College, Dublin, the other day called "an archetypal police state" on Irish soil. (The lady in question has of course been delighted to come to dinner at my house in the past) He has to cope with the enthusiasms both of those Irish who have never become reconciled to independence from the Crown and of those who regard the British Embassy as the ideal focus for demonstration
3. These enthusiasms run through the whole fabric of Irish society. Half the country accepts as something to emulate British standards of living and British ways of doing things, whether in the civil service or the avant garde theatre. The Irish economy is in such a mess today mainly because the electorate expects all the benefits we get in Britain without producing enough to pay for them. How can they not do so when British newspapers like The Sun

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have as high/ circulation as Irish papers, and when the populous eastern and southern seaboard are tuned into British rather than Irish television? The other half of the country is still rural, Roman Catholic, devoted to Gaelic sports, old-fashioned, inward-looking, and mistrustful, as de Valera was, of the modern world. Often these contrasting attitudes co-exist in the same person, and produce substantial problems for the diplomat trying to reach an understanding with that person or to guess the flow of Irish public opinion as a whole.

4. I have served here during a period when it was more possible to reach an understanding than at most times. Dr Garret FitzGerald has been Taoiseach throughout, a man of mixed heritage, Northern and Southern, Protestant and Catholic, and therefore more anxious to seek reconciliation within Ireland and with Britain than a representative of one tradition might ever be. His background helped him to think more easily along lines which made sense to British Ministers. But I do not suggest that our dealings with him have been free of difficulty. Indeed, he has demonstrated often enough those wayward elements in the Irish temperament to which I have referred. In the end, however, he wanted to do a deal, and so did we, and the deal was done. Mr Haughey, the last man to be willing to offer such praise, has told me it was a remarkable achievement.

5. I have written elsewhere of the merits of the Anglo-Irish Agreement and will not attempt to do so at length again. I believe the preamble sets out principles for life in this island which no honest Government could repudiate. As long as the Agreement holds, no system of exclusive Protestant rule in the North can ever again be acceptable, and no move to impose the will of the Government of the Republic in the North can be in accordance with their international obligations. In its first year, the principal achievement of the two signatories has been to keep it going: to keep their word, to establish their new relationship, and to ensure that the security forces, North and South, whatever the difficulties facing them, are pursuing the commitments undertaken. Of course, the Agreement has not yet brought peace and stability but it has strengthened support in the Northern Ireland minority for those who are on the side of peace and stability. Of course, not all wrongs have been redressed; but they are being reviewed.

6. The question of how long the Agreement will hold depends on both signatories. Its enemies look forward to the elections which they expect within the next 18 months on both sides of the Irish Sea. When the Irish elections come, there is some chance that Dr FitzGerald will be returned to power, in coalition this time with the Progressive Democrats, provided that the economic problems facing the country do not get very much worse and that no sudden squalls blow up. Dr FitzGerald, as Taoiseach once again, would follow the same policies towards the Anglo-Irish Agreement as today: doing his best to stick to his promises to us and to the nationalists, pressing us to meet

their hopes and cautiously waving an olive branch to any unionists who come into sight. Mr Haughey, whose standing among the voters fluctuates, but whose chances of power are better than Dr FitzGerald's, is a less transparent politician. His private discussions with me over the past year suggest that, while he will bang the republican drum in public, he will endeavour not to put in danger the benefits which the Agreement offers for the two governments and for the nationalist people of Northern Ireland. A tricky policy: but he is by nature a tricky man. He will be inclined to ask too much of any British Government; but he is realist enough to be aware that there are many questions which invite a negative reply. I think it doubtful whether any clear-thinking Dublin Government could see advantage, even in terms of domestic policies, in the abrogation of the Agreement as long as direct rule is maintained in Northern Ireland. Naturally, a politician like Mr Haughey is capable of a sudden and irrational impulse of hatred towards the British Government, leading to action against his own interests, of the kind he indulged in during the Falklands War. I believe that it should be possible, with very considerate acknowledgement of his susceptibilities and a constant stress on the achievement of mutual advantage, to retain his adherence to the Agreement. This might well involve some adjustments to policy in the North, particularly in the administration of the security forces and of justice, of the kind which Dr FitzGerald has unsuccessfully sought from us.

7. The principal questions about the future of the Agreement arise in the United Kingdom. I do not see why Unionist politicians should be willing to withdraw their opposition to the Agreement before seeing what the next Westminster elections will bring, nor why you and your colleagues should give way to that opposition in that period. Thereafter, it is clear that any British Government would have, as usual, a wider range of options than the Irish Government. Should a British Government in the future need, as Mr Callaghan's did in the past, to rely on Unionist votes, it could certainly seek to abrogate the Agreement on the grounds that it had not yet brought peace and stability to Northern Ireland in accordance with its declared aims. On the other hand, a British Government committed to the reunification of Ireland could find the Agreement's careful exclusion of any exercise of joint authority an unwelcome brake on its initiatives. It seems more likely that Her Majesty's Ministers will want to continue to try to implement the Agreement on current lines, given the general support for it at present in Westminster. In that case, I think it permissible to hope that there are some Protestants in Northern Ireland intelligent enough to see that their political leaders are following the path of self-destruction. I trust that British Ministers can, with luck, yet find people with whom to establish a devolved administration giving due weight to the opinions and wishes of both communities in Northern Ireland. Such an administration could not be perfect, but it would be a tremendous advance on direct rule. It is difficult to believe that there is no Northerner in Belfast with enough sense, courage, and commitment to snatch such a victory from the current confusion. Goethe describes Mephistopheles as "Der Geist, der stets verneint" -

the Spirit that continually says No. Surely some Unionist politician can be found in Northern Ireland willing to say Yes?

8. Come what may, like Sunningdale, the Agreement cannot be forgotten. If it were to collapse under ill-judged pressure from Mr Haughey or to be rejected, under Unionist pressure, in favour of a continuance of direct rule, it would still offer elements from which any new beginning at giving the people of these islands a reasonable basis for living together would have to be formed.

9. It would do so even in the most dangerous and, perhaps, least avoidable case: British withdrawal from the North. Here I am not, of course, thinking of the next few years but perhaps of as early a period as the nineties. There are already Northern Protestant leaders who seem to want this, and whose tactics - and personalities - are, it appears, alienating the British electorate from willingness to sacrifice more British lives and British money in an attempt to secure a decent life in Northern Ireland. Those who repudiate the authority of the Queen in Parliament should not call themselves Loyalists, and cannot expect to enjoy the support of those who are loyal. Mr Haughey and his like could make common cause with them; he has hinted to me before now that he has such clandestine connexions; and he has said enough in public to suggest that for the name of a United Ireland he would pay a great deal in terms of Protestant hegemony in the North. But this is to ignore two problems: the IRA and the money. Would the old gang bury their weapons at Mr Peter Robinson's inauguration at the head of an Ulster administration in a United Ireland? It appears improbable. Would the English pay a penny to sustain it? I do not know. The other day, I was shown a letter dated 10 October, 1921, from Mr Lloyd George to Sir James Craig: "It will be evident that the people of Great Britain are making important sacrifices for the sake of a settlement". Mr Lloyd George cringed under Sir James Craig's bullying. Prime Ministers are made of sterner stuff these days. But we might think a final answer to the Irish question worth the money.

10. If this were to take place the consequences would not necessarily be as bad as the consequences of our withdrawal from Palestine, even though religious wars are usually the worst, God forgive us! No doubt Britain would have to cope with an exodus of refugees. Provided they did not import their quarrels on a major scale, and I think that unlikely, they would be easier to assimilate than most. In Northern Ireland blood might very well flow, but with no-one to hold the ring the Irish, of whatever persuasion, might come more easily to terms with one another. At present, while the British maintain their responsibilities, the factions in the North are free to be irresponsible. One can foresee outcomes which need not prevent, indeed which would encourage, the establishment of new ties between these islands and within Europe.

11. I am not advocating British withdrawal from the North. I am afraid of civil war. I simply think that in the end the British are going to find the Unionists too unpalatable to stomach and are going to leave them to stew in their own juice. If anything is likely to lead to the dissolution of the United Kingdom, I believe it will be the obstinacy of the Northern Protestants and not passionate nationalism.

12. I am conscious that Diplomatic Service despatches do not normally discuss the future of the United Kingdom, and that I have said a lot about Northern Ireland. I hope you will forgive me, when so much of my job and that of my predecessors has been to discuss, expound, and defend Ministers' policies on Northern Ireland and to discuss and interpret the Irish Government's views on this most obsessive subject.

13. I will revert to where I began, with my own career. I think I will let the customary tributes be taken for granted. I do not want you to think it has all been fun. From time to time during the past decades of working for Ministers and for senior members of the Foreign Office I have felt badly treated and frustrated. I think many of my colleagues have felt the same and will feel the same. But I also want to record that in this job, also from time to time, one can put a thumb print into the wet plaster of history as it is formed. As I have tried to show, I have had opportunities of this kind, and I am grateful to have been entrusted with them.

14. I am sending copies of this despatch to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Secretary to the Cabinet, my colleagues in the United Kingdom Delegation Brussels, and in the capitals of the European Community, Washington, and the Holy See.

15. I have the honour to be, Sir, for the last time, and as I have been to your predecessors for so many years,

With great truth and regard

Your most obedient, humble servant

Alan Goodison

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