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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

Ireland



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

GREAT GEORGE STREET,

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Michael Alexander Esq
10 Downing Street

19 December 1980

Dear Mr. Alexander.

MEETING WITH DR PAISLEY

- ... I attach a brief for the Prime Minister's meeting with Dr Paisley at 11.30am today. It consists of speaking notes on Anglo/Irish relations, in the context of the Dublin meeting of 8 December, and on Dr Paisley's idea of a referendum in Great Britain about the future of Northern Ireland. Background notes on these matters are included. There
- ... is also a very brief speaking note on the Hunger Strike.

Yours sincerely

May Wright

PP W M HOPINS

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PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH DR PAISLEY: 19 DECEMBER 1980

Points to Make

Anglo-Irish Relations

Primary objective of strategy laid out in Dublin on 8 December is peace, reconciliation and stability. Joint studies and any proposals that may emerge fall within that aim.

These plans are intended to bring UK and Republic closer together. So they include Northern Ireland, and we intend that they should contribute to Northern Ireland's well-being and stability. But they are not focussed on Northern Ireland. It is through its membership of UK that Northern Ireland is involved.

Not in HMG's interest to promote any plans which threaten stability in Northern Ireland. Joint study of Northern Ireland's constitutional future would do that, and is not on the table.

HMG will continue to govern Northern Ireland until Parliament and its people decide otherwise. No question of seeking to impose anything on them.

Possible federal or confederal arrangements not up for discussion; nor institutions such as Council of Ireland, since we agreed to study ways of developing UK/Republic unique relationship, not specifically Northern Ireland/Republic.

Therefore nothing threatening or sinister about joint studies. We already have close cooperation in economic matters. Should this cooperation be formalised in some way? Is there advantage in developing institutions that, without impinging on sovereignty, make for closer consultation at all levels - official, minister^{ial}, perhaps parliamentary?

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A REFERENDUM TO ENABLE THE PEOPLE OF GREAT BRITAIN TO DECIDE UPON
NORTHERN IRELAND'S POSITION WITHIN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Line to take

HMG's position on Northern Ireland's constitutional status is clear. Northern Ireland will not leave the United Kingdom without the consent of a majority of people living in the Province. That is a fundamental principle from which we will not budge; moreover it is accepted by the opposition and by the Government of the Republic. It would be inconsistent with that policy to hold a referendum in which the people of Great Britain would be asked to vote upon Northern Ireland's status and the Government will not do so.

The outcome of a referendum would be uncertain. The turn-out would probably be so low as to make the result very difficult to interpret. And it could be heavily influenced by the prevailing circumstances - a particularly effective campaign by one side or the other - security incidents on the mainland etc. Indeed it would invite the IRA to initiate a new bombing campaign, to persuade the British people to "eject" Northern Ireland. Fear and uncertainty about the future caused by the referendum would have a destabilising effect within Northern Ireland, with an increase in inter-communal tensions. No responsible Government could allow the future of part of its territory to be decided in this way.

Anglo/Irish Relations

The Prime Minister met the Taoiseach Mr. Haughey in Dublin on 8 December for a wide-ranging discussion of European Community and other international issues, as well as matters of concern to both countries. This was the first of a series of meetings on which the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister had agreed when they met in London on 21 May.

The Prime Ministers agreed that the best prospect of achieving peace, reconciliation and stability in Northern Ireland lay in improving relations between the peoples of the United Kingdom and the Republic by developing the unique relationship between the two countries. To this end they commissioned, for their next meeting next year, joint studies covering a range of issues including possible new institutional structures, citizenship rights, security matters, economic co-operation and measures to encourage mutual understanding.

The reference to joint studies of institutional structures has drawn predictable comments from some unionist politicians notably Dr. Paisley who warned that "should Mrs. Thatcher dare to try to establish institutional structures between Dublin and London affecting Northern Ireland or proceed to give Eire a say in drawing up Ulster policy, or should she do anything inconsistent with Northern Ireland being wholly an internal matter, then I will lead the Ulster Protestant people in whatever actions are necessary to thwart and destroy such machinery".

These anxieties are misplaced. First, the studies of possible institutional structures are not directed to Northern Ireland's

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constitutional future. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and will remain so unless its people decide otherwise. Nor is there any question of the Government seeking to impose anything on the people of Northern Ireland: nor does Mr. Haughey want to impose anything either. The question is whether - as we hope - an evolution of the unique British-Irish relationship can help achieve peace and stability.

Moreover the communique speaks of institutional, not constitutional structures. Federal or confederal changes which would diminish the powers or duties of the two sovereign governments are not contemplated by HMG. We are simply prepared to consider whether new arrangements would be helpful to facilitate consultation at all levels - official, Ministerial, and even parliamentary.

To illustrate this: the Dublin meeting was itself one of a series, similar to those we have with other countries with which we have close relations. That in itself represents an institutional structure. Could we go further? Benelux and the Nordic Council are examples of structures which other nations have developed to reflect a special relationship, while preserving national sovereignty. We already have close co-operation with the Irish in economic matters. Would it help to formalize this in some way? These are the sort of questions to be considered. But it would not be right to try to pre-judge the outcome.

The people of NI, unionist or nationalist, have nothing to fear from these joint studies or from the development of the unique relationship between the UK and Ireland which they are intended to set forward. The emphasis is on new UK/Republic structures for bringing the two countries closer together in a friendly and

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fruitful relationship. NI as part of the UK would of course share in any such new structures, and could benefit much from them.

Following the Dublin meeting, the Irish Foreign Minister, Mr Lenihan, suggested that discussion of constitutional changes for Northern Ireland was now "on the table". This interpretation was quickly repudiated in a statement from No.10 on 12 December which said:-

"The Dublin communiqué makes it clear, and the Prime Minister has repeated since, that the subject of joint Anglo-Irish discussions will be possible institutional structures not constitutional structures. The Prime Minister's letter on 10 December to Dr Paisley said Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and will remain so unless its people and the Westminster Parliament decide otherwise."

It seems that the Irish Government have taken the point: in a statement on 13 December Mr Lenihan said that there was no question of a constitutional investigation or examination, and that the examination would be of institutional structures only.

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BACKGROUND NOTE

A Referendum

1. In an interview broadcast on Weekend World on 14 December Ian Paisley said, "Let the people of the United Kingdom speak without the people of Northern Ireland. Let the Scottish, the Welsh and the English people say whether they want Northern Ireland and if they vote that they don't want Northern Ireland then we must recognise the wishes of the people". He went on to say that in the event of a "no" vote, Ulster would have no other option but to go, not into a United Ireland, but "it would mean that we would have to tighten our belts and go on our own and seek friends in the world wherever we could find them". Dr Paisley has on a number of occasions over the past ten years flirted with the idea of a GB referendum. It has been one of his responses to a situation where he believes the United Kingdom Government to be paying undue attention to the Irish dimension - in the aftermath of the Sunningdale agreement for example.

2. The significance of these latest comments is best assessed by looking at Dr Paisley's general approach to the interview. He made it clear that his primary concern was to maintain the Protestant way of life in Northern Ireland, preferably but not necessarily within the United Kingdom. Thus if the Government chose (in his eyes) to threaten Ulster Protestantism by forging links with the Republic, there would be resistance. The referendum appears to be seen by Dr Paisley as a means of establishing whether the people of Great Britain wish to maintain the link with Northern Ireland on his terms; if not, he views independence as the only answer. In short, the union is only of value in so far as it upholds Protestant traditions and values. Although it is unlikely that Dr Paisley seriously expects a referendum to be held, he may be using the issue as a means of demonstrating Protestant self-sufficiency and determination to resist moves towards Irish unity at any cost.

3. Reaction in Northern Ireland to the suggestion of a referendum has been hostile where the Official Unionists are concerned. Mr Molyneaux described the proposal as very dangerous, leaving the future of Ulster in the hands of fanatics and he noted that there were two million Irishmen in Great Britain who would vote

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against the Province. Others were concerned that the voters in Great Britain could not be expected to make a rational decision after ten years of Republican violence and expressed fears that the case for the union would not be properly represented. Mr Kilfedder objected to the suggestion, inherent in the referendum concept, that the people of Northern Ireland did not care whether or not they remained in the United Kingdom. The Alliance Party view is that Dr Paisley is seeking to exploit fears and divisions for his own ends. Only the SDLP have given the proposal a cautious welcome and John Hume took the opportunity to point out that the Protestant way of life could be safeguarded within a federal Ireland.

4. The outcome of a referendum held in Great Britain would be difficult to predict. What evidence there is from the few recent attitude surveys on the subject suggests that a substantial body of opinion sees Irish unity as the most likely setting for the resolution of conflict within Northern Ireland. On the other hand in a survey carried out in November of this year for Weekend World, 65% of those interviewed were in favour of maintaining the guarantee. Much depends on the way in which the question is put and it is probably fair to say that people in Great Britain are confused about the issue, having no firm views on the desirability or otherwise of maintaining the union. In these circumstances the result of a referendum could well be crucially influenced by events such as IRA violence on the mainland or by a particularly well orchestrated campaign mounted by one side or the other. A low poll might distort and effectively invalidate the result. It is apparent that a referendum in Great Britain would not be a sensible way of deciding upon such a fundamental issue as the future of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom.

5. To hold a referendum of the type suggested would be to imply that Northern Ireland could be forced to leave the United Kingdom without the consent of the people living in the Province. The Prime Minister may wish to take the opportunity of telling Dr Paisley that the Government could not contemplate such a prospect and of reiterating HMG's commitment to the guarantee. A firm statement along these lines might help reassure Protestant opinion in Northern Ireland.

PRISONERS' HUNGER STRIKESpeaking Notes

We have entirely ruled out special 'political' status, or any arrangements giving terrorists a distinctive prison regime.

We have not negotiated with hunger-strikers, nor countenanced mediation. We have taken trouble to ensure that they understand HMG's position, both on status and on conditions which would be available to them, like other prisoners, once they conformed to Rules.

We do not want anyone to die, and we do not like the protest. But we cannot compromise on special status nor give any group of prisoners control in its part of the prison.

We note with satisfaction that the misguided hunger strike of six 'loyalist' prisoners at Maze was short-lived. 'Loyalists' cannot expect special treatment any more than Republicans.