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1. Dr. G. FitzGerald, T.D., Minister for Foreign Affairs, met Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, M.P., Leader of the Conservative Party at the House of Commons in London on 5 March 1975. The Minister was accompanied by Ambassador O'Sullivan and Mr. Seán Donlon. Mrs. Thatcher was accompanied by Mr. Airey Neave, M.P., Conservative Party spokesman on Northern Ireland and by Mr. Forman of the Conservative Research Office. On arrival at Mrs. Thatcher's office the Minister was met by Mr. William Whitelaw, M.P., who introduced the Minister but did not stay for the meeting. In a brief private conversation with the Minister, he told him that he would do everything in his power to prevent any deal between the Conservatives and any of the NI loyalist groups and he added that he thought his position in the party was still such that he could effectively prevent any such deal.

2. The meeting opened with a discussion on the EEC and the Minister explained the present state of the British "renegotiations". Mrs. Thatcher asked if in return for a suitable package, Britain's partners would require full British Government endorsement of the package and when the Minister confirmed that this was the expectation she said that a "one and indivisible" Government would have to come out and campaign actively for Britain's staying in the Communities. She expressed the hope that Britain would have a high poll and good majority and she made it clear that she herself would be working very actively for such an outcome. The clear implication of what she said on this topic was that she was not going to leave the running of the Conservative referendum campaign to Mr. Heath. Later on in the meeting Mrs. Thatcher returned to the referendum and expressed herself as being very worried about the outcome, particularly if all the political leaders did not fully and actively endorse the renegotiated package. There were, she said, powerful demagogues, such as Powell and Foot, against staying in and they would have a significant influence in the country. She did not think Judith Hart's hostility to the EEC

would be strong enough to attract her to fight against continued membership and added somewhat caustically that "Judith will do whatever is necessary to keep her job". Her concluding remarks on the EEC referendum were that it was an appalling aspect of the whole affair that Britain had lost respect and support by so blatantly dishonouring an international treaty obligation. The Government which had done this would at least have to campaign wholeheartedly for a "yes" vote. It would be a worrying campaign but at the end of the day Britain would stay in the Communities by a handsome majority.

3. On Northern Ireland, neither Mrs. Thatcher nor Mr. Neave said very much and listened to the Minister's assessment of the present situation. The Minister said that the ceasefire was naturally a welcome development but the circumstances in which it came about, notably the discussions with the IRA through intermediaries, gave some cause for worry. The incident centres were a potential source of worry because of the possibility of their developing a policing role. We had expressed our reservations to the British Government on this and the Secretary of State had firmly if belatedly killed the idea. The minority community were unlikely in the extreme to accept IRA policing and the prospect of ^{nothing} the UDA ^{particular} particularly unnerved them. The British attitude to the UDA and to loyalist violence in general was most unhelpful, especially during the UWC strike. We would like to see this violence being confronted, though it was a matter for those in authority in the UK to decide exactly when and how this should be done.

4. Mr. Neave expressed concern about the incident centres and wondered if he should call for their abolishment. The Minister replied that their operation needed to be carefully watched but that at the moment any attempt to abolish them would certainly put the ceasefire at risk. We would have preferred a different approach, possibly one involving more releases of detainees. That,

rather than talking to the IRA, would have been the best way of reducing IRA support. The Minister went on to point to the dangers of talking to the IRA and emphasised that successive governments in Dublin had not done so since the foundation of the state.

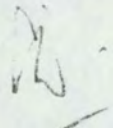
5. In regard to the Convention elections, the Minister thought it improbable that the loyalists would be in a minority. The SDLP were likely to hold their own, the UPNI might win 6-9 seats, Alliance would more or less hold their own and the Provisionals, if they stood, would get a minimum of 2 and maximum of 4 seats. A loyalist majority in the Convention would fortify them in their intransigence, they would reject all efforts at power-sharing and demand a return to one party Stormont rule. Unfortunately, our contacts with loyalists confirmed us in the view that they were unlikely to change their position on power-sharing. There were, however, some hopeful developments which deserved to be noted. Paisley was being increasingly isolated from his UUUC colleagues and the West/Craig axis was strengthening. There was a basic Protestant fear of Paisley but unfortunately even if he were politically isolated, his potential destructive influence was enormous. On the SDLP side, there were signs of a shift on the policing issue. They now favoured the transfer of policing functions back to Belfast from London - something which they strongly resisted at Sunningdale. But these developments did not add up to very much and the fear of each community by the other which was at the heart of the problem was still there and as deep-rooted as ever. The minority's sense of having been humiliated and depressed for fifty years was strong, especially in Belfast and the recent violence which had caused such massive shifts of Catholics into the relative safety of the ghettos had an enormous impact in confirming minority fears. Intimidation was widespread and almost nothing was being done to deal with it. Mythology also had an impact and this was even more difficult to deal with but

perhaps the attitudes now being taken in the Republic would contribute to killing some of the more outlandish myths on the Protestant side.

6. Mrs. Thatcher asked about the timing of the Convention elections to which the Minister replied that though we would have liked to see them held much later in the year, it seemed clear that on present plans they would be held in April/May. The outcome would naturally be considerably influenced by the incidence of violence between now and then and the present indications suggested that the Provisional IRA ceasefire would hold, at least until an April/May election. There was, of course, considerable continuing violence from the other side and the potential for even greater violence from UDA/UVF type organisations should not be under-estimated. Craig and Paisley were never far removed from such bodies and indeed Craig had within the last few years set up his own paramilitary body which, though quiet at the moment, could be brought into action at any time. Paisley's record was a matter of public knowledge. Court cases had shown that he was only one remove from direct participation in acts of violence in the sixties which were aimed at bringing down the O'Neill Government and it was very likely that he was indirectly involved both then and now in the sectarian assassination campaign.

7. The Minister then outlined to Mrs. Thatcher the nature of our contacts with Northern Ireland political parties and assured her that in formulating our positions we were at least doing so in the full knowledge of the attitudes on both sides of the political divide. The unionists had generally come to a better appreciation of Dublin's position and were, for instance, particularly appreciative of our recent handling of the IRA hunger strike in Portlaoise prison. Being sensitive to unionist opinion, we could also refrain from making the type of speeches which gave unnecessary offence and did not advance political developments. This, of

course, was a negative contribution and, from a domestic point of view, politically not very satisfactory but at the moment we judged it the best position to adopt. Our relations with the SDLP were close though naturally the relationship had its ups and downs. It was vitally important to boost the SDLP as much as possible. At the moment their morale was low because of the British dealing with the IRA and anything which the Conservatives could do to help SDLP morale would be useful. Mr. Neave said he hoped to visit Northern Ireland shortly and he would make a special point of seeing the SDLP and spending some time with them. The Minister invited Mr. Neave to visit Dublin either immediately following his forthcoming trip to Northern Ireland or subsequently. Mr. Neave thanked the Minister for the invitation, said he had planned to visit Dublin in any event and would probably do so shortly after Easter.


Seán Donlon

10 March 1975