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Ms. J. Murphy

Report of Meeting between the Minister for Foreign Affairs,
Mr. Brian Lenihan T.D., and the Secretary of State for Northern
Ireland, the Rt. Hon. Humphrey Atkins M.P., Dublin, 15 April 1980.

1. After an initial exchange of courtesies Mr. Lenihan suggested the normal agenda of political, security and economic matters. He described the developments initiated in Northern Ireland by Mr. Atkins as being important and referred to other aspects of the situation such as North/South and Irish/British relations. As far as the Irish Government was concerned his presentation would be in the nature of an exploratory disclosure of views and would not represent hard and fast attitudes. Further discussions would take place between Mrs. Thatcher and the Taoiseach.

2. Mr. Atkins thanked the Minister and said that there were so many matters of common concern that these meetings were useful and should be held at regular but not fixed intervals.

3. Economic Aspects

It was decided to deal with the economic aspects first. The Minister explained that due to his commitment to travel to Zimbabwe he would not be able to host the reception in Dundalk to launch the Newry/Dundalk report on 17 April but the Minister for Defence would attend instead. He noted that the Erne Catchment area report was tentatively due to be published in late May. The Minister referred to the proposal in the Derry/Donegal Communications Study for a Derry/Dublin air link and stressed our willingness to proceed with some element of subsidisation. In relation to the Lough Swilly Bus Co. the Minister indicated that efforts were being made to keep the service going. He noted that a progress report was due shortly on the Derry/Donegal study.

4. The Secretary of State referred to the recent Anglo-Irish Steering Group meeting and the need without criticism of officials to give "a push" in this area. In relation to the Derry/Dublin air link he said that it was hopelessly uneconomic. Minister Lenihan acknowledged that while there might be budgetary constraints such an air link would have an impact in an area which was

relatively peaceful and had a good community way of life. The Secretary of State said that their figures indicated a subsidisation cost of £500 per round trip. In addition the improvements to the Derry bridge needed to be taken into account. These improvements would cost £15 million and would be completed in 1982. The Minister asked the Secretary of State to look at the air link question again and not to close the door on the situation. The Secretary agreed to look at the question again but said that the outlook was not good. The Minister referred to the Newry/Dundalk report and asked what the position was on the road question (Newry/Dundalk bypass). Mr. Neligan said that there would be further discussions at official level and that a consultant's report would be commissioned on this question. Both the Secretary of State and the Minister indicated that an early progress report on the implementation of these reports would be useful and it was agreed that 4/6 weeks would be a suitable time-scale.

5. Non-Quota Section of ERDF

The Secretary of State in replying to the Minister's query on this issue said that it was part of a wider difficulty related to the Community budget. The Minister said that it was a pity that the non-quota section which was aimed specifically at border areas should be blocked for tactical reasons. Mr. Atkins said that he hoped the situation would be cleared up at the European Council. If not he would raise the situation at Cabinet level although he could not guarantee that unblocking of the fund would result.

6. Interconnector

The Minister raised the question of the North/South interconnector. The Secretary of State said that both sides wanted to see it in operation but intimidation took place recently which had stopped the work. Mr. Hannigan explained that 5 workmen had been seriously intimidated by the PIRA on 23 March. Other means of completing the work perhaps via the British Army would have to be considered. Mr. Lenihan said that he would make a reference to it in a PQ which was on the Order Paper for answer that day. The Minister enquired what else could be done. The Secretary of State said that we

could declare our joint interest in repairing the interconnector. The Minister felt that this could perhaps be seen as stimulating or provoking an attack on it especially if the British Army is carrying out the work. In response to a question from the Minister, Mr. Colwell said that there was no antagonism on the southern side of the border to the interconnector. Mr. Hannigan said that his information was that the vehicle hijacked for use in the intimidation operation on 23 March had come from the southern side of the border. It was a problem for both sides. The Secretary of State raised again the question of a joint statement. The Minister at that point read out the full text of the reference in the PQ to the interconnector and passed over a copy of the text. The Minister enquired whether the statements involved could trigger off further trouble and if so what could be done about it. Mr. Colwell said that the police on both sides could review the situation. Mr. Hannigan enquired whether it should be the police only or whether discussions might be required at NIO/DFA level. Mr. Colwell replied that the police could do it and if this was not satisfactory other arrangements could be made.

7. The Secretary of State felt that the PQ was a helpful way of going about it and that he could arrange for a question to be put down for written answer at the same time in Westminster. It was agreed that the two sides should liaise on the timing at official level. It was also agreed at the suggestion of the Secretary of State that the answer to the PQ should contain a reference to maintenance of the interconnector as well as its restoration. Mr. Hannigan said that it would take at least 3 months to finish the work and obviously we would be anxious to see it in operation before next winter.

8. Closure of border roads

The Minister referred to the distress and inconvenience caused by such closures and referred to Kiltyclogher and Pettigo in particular. The Secretary of State said that he had closed 4 roads recently that had been illegally reopened but he was not going in for a policy of wholesale closures.

9. Security Co-operation

The Minister stressed the need to limit overflights to the minimum and only in relation to serious incidents in view of their sensitivity. The Secretary of State expressed satisfaction at the way in which security cooperation in general was operating.

10. Crossmaglen

Mr. Lenihan stressed the importance of completing the work of removing the helicopter pad from the GAA grounds and returning the property to the GAA. The Secretary of State said that he had had many discussions with officials and the army on this question. The work at the GAA grounds had been delayed due to other urgent security protection work but he hoped that everything would be completed and the bulk of the grounds returned to the GAA by September.

11. The Minister also mentioned that he had received representations in relation to harassment of some Cork County Board GAA officials who visited Crossmaglen GAA grounds recently.

12. Carlingford Lough

The Secretary of State raised the question of the non-payment of fees due to the Carlingford Lough Commissioners. Mr. Neligan said that the AIESG had discussed this matter last month and it had been agreed that officials get together to consider the possibility of reconstituting on a joint basis the Carlingford Lough Board perhaps in the context of a harbour improvement scheme. The Secretary of State agreed that this was a good idea.

15. The Secretary of State enquired about changes in the law which were under consideration in Dublin. Mr. Colwell said that his Department was examining the law of evidence but that there were many difficulties involved and that no changes were likely in the immediate future. The Secretary of State felt that both sides should keep in touch on this problem. He said that pressure on him in relation to the extraterritorial legislation had eased. He understood that a case was with the DPP in Dublin at present. It was important to try and show that the legislation works.

16. Long Kesh and Armagh Prisons

The Minister raised the above question and the Secretary of State outlined the recent proposals which he had made stressing that there was "no way" in which he would move on political status.

Mr. Hannigan said that the prisoners had refused to take these concessions but that the authorities would continue to monitor the humanitarian aspect apart from the question of political status. He referred to the two weekly steam-cleaning of cells and a strict medical observation regime. The Minister referred to the conditions pertaining in prisons in the South where a fairly liberal regime was applied right across the board, not just in relation to specific categories. A detailed list of the regime applying in Portlaoise had been supplied to the British Embassy. The Secretary of State intervened to say that the prisoners want political status and they are not going to get it. Mr. Hannigan said that political status related to certain concessions. One of the concessions sought was the right to wear one's own clothes. If this were conceded even on a general basis it would be perceived and presented as granting of political status. The Secretary of State said that

in Armagh prison the female inmates were allowed to wear their own clothes but some of them were engaging in a "dirty campaign". There was no guarantee that further humanitarian concessions would end the campaign in Long Kesh. Mr. Stowe said that they also had to bear in mind the morale of prison warders who had a very difficult job to do and were also subject to random assassination attacks.

17. Political Aspects

The Secretary of State indicated that he had said to the Taoiseach that the Irish Government's interest in Northern Ireland was greater than any other party except of course the people of Northern Ireland. All should be aware however that if certain politicians thought that we (Irish/British) were considering proposals in relation to the future of Northern Ireland there would be an explosion. The Secretary of State said that he was quite determined to make progress. People in general now fully appreciate that the British Government means what it says in relation to Northern Ireland. He felt that it is the right time to make a move for three reasons: (a) the Conservative Party unlike the previous government has a large majority in Parliament; (b) they regard the present arrangements as unsatisfactory: Englishmen like him were running Northern Ireland on a day to day basis leaving no incentives or involvement for local politicians with resultant apathy; (c) elapse of time - it was eight years since the termination of Stormont and 5/6 years since the Sunningdale arrangement had collapsed. For these reasons the British Government felt it was the time to act. However legislation etc. would take at least a year before any new system could be put into operation. The Minister agreed that the political vacuum had been most harmful and should be filled without delay.

The Secretary of State referred to paras. 4 and 5 of the White Paper which set the scene for the recent constitutional conference. Paragraph 4 outlined what he did not propose to do and paragraph 5 elaborated seven principles. All parties in Northern Ireland except the OUP had accepted these two paragraphs. People seemed to think that he had some secret plan which he would impose at some stage. This was not true. Any

imposed plan would fail. The Secretary of State would try and devise some way forward which was acceptable to all parties. No one party in Northern Ireland could however expect to get everything it sought at this stage. The Secretary of State felt that everybody should understand that this was a "modest step forward". One step would have to be taken at a time. There was "no way" he could go round promoting Irish unity. This was simply not possible. That was not to say however that it was something the British Government would stand in the way of - but it could not promote it. The only criterion which he had was that the people of Northern Ireland should choose their final destination. The British Government would try to lead and encourage people to take a first step forward in Northern Ireland. The Protestant community have genuine apprehensions. It was important to take it step by step and the first step was the setting up of a devolved administration in Northern Ireland.

18. The Minister said that in presenting the Irish Government's point of view he did not wish to preempt further discussions which would take place on this question. Arising out of our experience of the situation the Minister said that it was not possible to look at the situation in Northern Ireland in isolation. It cannot be viewed simply in the light of the local context. One also had to consider the North/South and the Irish/British elements. While it may cause trouble to move on the latter two aspects it would be in the long term benefit of North/South and Anglo-Irish relations. There was also a problem in relation to terrorism which had to be dealt with on a joint basis. One also had to take into account the position of the SDLP. The situation could not be viewed in Northern Ireland terms alone. There was a real danger in the approach being adopted by the British Government. The establishment of devolved Government was a good thing in itself but it was not a solution to the over-all situation. Doors should not be shut after the attempt at devolved Government. A mechanism should be established through which the two Governments and the parties in Northern Ireland could get together in an

effort to produce a longer term solution. The Irish Government is an essential ingredient. Peace was the ultimate aim and it would not come in a "piecemeal" fashion. The Secretary of State should not make the mistake of thinking that a solution to the Northern Ireland situation would come from within Northern Ireland only. The British Government should recognise the possibility of creating a united Ireland and should declare their interest in its achievement.

19. The Minister felt strongly that some straight talking was needed with the majority community in Northern Ireland. There was no indication over the past 50/60 years of any need for apprehension on their part. The apprehension may exist but persuasion should be used.

20. The time was ripe for a more fundamental approach on the part of the four elements involved (British and Irish Governments and the two communities in Northern Ireland). There would be no credibility in the present efforts of the British Government unless a far more fundamental effort was made to resolve the basic issues. The British Government should acknowledge its interest in encouraging Irish unity as part of the way forward. A parallel process should be initiated between the four parties involved. The Minister speaking "candidly" said that another effort towards a devolved Government was doomed to failure unless the considerations he had outlined were taken into account. Sunningdale had been a brave effort but we did not wish to see another failure. The Minister referred to the Secretary of State's use of the words "step by step" and said that he could agree to a step by step approach only if it took into account the broader interests of the two islands as a whole.

21. The Secretary of State said he was glad that the Minister accepted the need for a step by step approach. He

had had extensive meetings with the political leaders in Northern Ireland and he felt that things will move forward. He was taking one step forward which need not inhibit other developments. Persuasion was needed to remove Protestant fears. The Irish Government needed people in Northern Ireland in authority whom it could talk to. Some local administration was needed in Northern Ireland. North/South cooperation could then develop between Dublin and the devolved administration. It was fine for the Minister and Secretary of State to sit here and talk but it would be better for Dublin to deal with Northern Ireland people at Stormont. The Irish dimension which was invented by a predecessor of his can mean whatever you wish it to mean. The Secretary of State acknowledged that North/South interests were often identical. The South could talk about these interests with an administration in Belfast.

22. Sunningdale had been too big a step forward at once. The Secretary of State recognised that progress could not be achieved in isolation. It was very much in the British interest to move forward and he acknowledged a need to keep Dublin informed of what they were doing.

23. Mr. Lenihan said that he had serious doubts about the feasibility of the Secretary of State's approach unless there was parallel progress in other areas - or unless the door was left open to such progress. Some conference or parallel talks were needed which take into account the North/South and Anglo-Irish

dimensions. If the British Government tried to operate in isolation it would not work.

24. The Secretary of State said that if a provincial administration was established we would then be talking to a Northerner perhaps Paisley. The Secretary of State said that bilateral meetings between Irish and British Ministers are necessary and would of course continue.

25. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that the British Government could not abstract itself from this situation. You cannot say here is Stormont and then opt out. The Secretary of State agreed with the Minister that they could not opt out but referred to the fact that the Minister was dealing with an Englishman resident in Berkshire. A Northern Minister might take a different view on the cost/benefit factor of the necessity for a Dublin/Derry air link. In the present circumstances an Englishman took that decision.

26. The Minister said that the Irish Government wished to see an end to the continuing conflict. This would not be achieved unless the broader aspects are considered. A new devolved administration will not get off the ground unless the North/South and Anglo-Irish elements are taken into account.

27. The Secretary of State said that if there was any effort at formalising relations between "us" it would not work. The Council of Ireland had ruined the Sunningdale effort. If there were public parallel talks any progress towards devolved government would stop. The two Governments could meet and discuss as normal but any public talks would kill the possibility of progress.

28. The Minister for Foreign Affairs said that he did not want to stop things in their tracks but we could not go ahead on a devolved government basis without leaving an avenue open for progress. Some formula must be devised otherwise present efforts would collapse. The Secretary of State referred to the danger that

any formula would close the door and said that this must not happen. The destiny of the people of Northern Ireland will have to be decided by them alone.

29. The Minister said that side by side with the Secretary of State's efforts to bring about devolved government he could declare an interest in further developments.

30. Mr. Stowe referred in some detail to the Secretary of State's efforts to get the DUP to agree to the parallel talks. The NIO had used the wording of the 1975 Convention Report which had been suggested by Paisley and the UUUC at the time. The NIO had hoped that use of this wording would forestall any criticism from the DUP in relation to the terms of the parallel talks. However, the DUP failed to recognise their language of five years ago and refused to join the parallel talks.

31. After some brief discussion on the terms of a communique the meeting adjourned after officials were instructed to work on the draft communique over lunch.