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Seen by Taoiseach

8/12/80

Summary

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22nd December 1980

Dear Paddy

I thought it might be useful for you to have a brief overview of reaction in the British national media to the Dublin meeting of 8th December between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister. There has been very extensive coverage of the meeting itself. Much of the coverage has also included comment on the hunger strike in the Maze Prison. On the whole the commentaries have welcomed the Dublin meeting and have been supportive of the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister in their efforts to move forward. Some of the comment has focussed on what are seen as divergences between London and Dublin in their interpretation of the communiqué. These slightly unfavourable commentaries have been, however, more the exception than the rule as it became clear that the remarks made following the meeting by the two sides were not fundamentally incompatible and as Paisley and Powell became rather more strident in their attacks on the two Governments.

The meeting, the response to it, and the hunger strike in the Maze have featured as a front-page story almost every day over the last two weeks. Editorial response has been considerable; the Times has had 4 leaders, the Guardian 5, the Economist 1, the Telegraph 4, the Sunday Telegraph 1, The Observer 2 and the Sunday Times 1. Some of the significant articles which have appeared include John Hume (Sunday Times, 14th December and Guardian, 22nd December), Enoch Powell (Guardian 15th December), Peter Jay (Times 15th December), Fred Emery (Times 13th December), George Brock (Observer 14th December), Chris Ryder (Sunday Times 14th and 21st December), Peter Jenkins, (Guardian 17th December). Unfortunately in the week beginning 8th

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December the Financial Times was not printed in Britain. It was however printed in Frankfurt and on Friday, 12th December, the Political Editor of the Financial Times, Malcolm Rutherford, wrote a major article on the meeting and on Northern Ireland. There was also extensive coverage on television and on radio and again this was on the whole favourable. The extent of the coverage and of the comment is an indication of the importance attached to the meeting by the British media. It was also universally accepted that the meeting was very significant and that the agreements reached there, as expressed in the communiqué, offered considerable hope in finding a way forward out of the Northern Ireland problem.

Guardian: The Guardian (8th December) clearly specified the task to be performed by Mrs Thatcher in going to Dublin: She was to set about reorganising the relations between Britain and Ireland recognising that Northern Ireland cannot be held to belong entirely to Britain. The Dublin talks presented an opportunity because it was felt that the Taoiseach was in a unique position to talk realistically on Anglo-Irish relations and that Mrs Thatcher should try to ensure and if necessary insist that Northern Unionists give him a hearing. In a subsequent editorial (12th December) the Guardian discounted Mrs Thatcher's efforts to play down the importance of the meeting and notwithstanding the enthusiasm with which the outcome of the meeting was greeted in Dublin suggests that the wording of the communiqué itself pointed to a much greater degree of cooperation than heretofore and for this reason the significance of the meeting was unquestionable. The Guardian has suggested that the meeting has brought about a very significant change because in discussing "the totality of relationships" the Republic is finally recognised as having a say in Northern Ireland. Having raised Anglo-Irish relations to this new level it is optimistic that significant progress can now be made and a gradual solution can be evolved through increased cooperation in all areas until such time as the border ceases to be of importance to the people, North or South. It suggests that the communiqué supplied this long range strategy. Paisley's statements were considered only a distraction.

The Guardian (12th December) in its Agenda section carried a lengthy article by Enoch Powell, which bitterly attacked the outcome of the Dublin meeting but which significantly argued that it was now formally agreed by the two Governments that they would set up "continuing machinery to address themselves jointly to the internal affairs of Northern Ireland". In an editorial (20th December) the paper concluded that Powell's contribution to reconciliation begins to match that of the IRA.

Times: Unlike the Guardian position the Times editorials focussed almost exclusively on the differing interpretations taken from the meeting and the failure of Mrs Thatcher to disclose details of the talks. The Times (10th December) feels that the idea of using "the unique relationship" as a solvent for the Ulster impasse has something to commend it though it can only satisfy the aspiration for a united Ireland on a very long timescale. The way forward is seen as just as difficult as previous solutions because Mr Haughey's desire to get from the unique relationship a more direct say in Northern Ireland has the effect of arousing Protestant opposition.

If Mrs Thatcher fails to contradict Mr Haughey's interpretation of the meeting the ^{implication will be} that a significant change in her policy has occurred. The Times (12th December) also pointed to the significance of the Dublin meeting in that Mrs Thatcher has so far failed to repeat earlier assertions that the Republic had no role to play in N. Ireland and Mr Haughey's own statements imply that he has in fact been granted a say. The differences of emphasis given by the two leaders following the meeting might, it was felt, suggest a similar wide divergence in views at the meeting and contrary to the expressions of close relationships contained in the communiqué. The Times feels that these contrary understandings may lead in the end to recriminations and accusations of bad faith.

In his weekly column on the 13th the Political Editor of the Times, Fred Emery, clearly concluded that a change had taken place in Government policy and that Dublin is now "Included in". He added that Thatcher has refused to accept the status quo in Northern Ireland

Peter Jay, late British Ambassador in Washington, suggested in the Times on 15th that the involvement of Lord Carrington points out that something more important than mere short-term political accommodation is in hand and argues that the Dublin case is a way forward.

Financial Times: In a major article on December 12th, Rutherford, the Political Editor, drew attention to the importance of the Dublin meeting. British plans for devolution in Northern Ireland are now dead and British policy is back to square one. Politically speaking the situation has been urgent ever since the hunger strike began. Mr Haughey is the man in Ireland with whom people have to deal and has already delivered his side of the bargain to Mrs Thatcher. Drawing on his meeting with the Taoiseach last July during the press trip Rutherford said that the Taoiseach had been proved right in some of his forecasts. He argued that we would prefer the convening of a special Conference. Much will depend on how the study group works. The British could be very obstructive and it is up to the Irish to come up with some ideas. Writing before the end of the hunger strike he said that if it were abandoned the Taoiseach and John Hume would have another reason for saying they had delivered their part of the bargain. They will have shown that they can control events in Ireland in a way which the British cannot. He concluded by saying that the next Irish demand is likely to be a full-scale conference Lancaster House-style. The British should accept as soon as possible as the time is very nearly ripe in Ireland for a solution.

Sunday Times: Its coverage on 14th December was extensive with lengthy articles by John Hume, Michael Jones and Chris Ryder. There was also extensive coverage on 21st December with a front-page story giving details of the Sunday Times/MORI poll taken in Britain in which a majority decided that they would vote in a referendum to let Northern Ireland leave the United Kingdom. In a leader on 21st December, following the ending of the hunger strike the paper said that the condemnation by the

Dublin Government played an important part in the ending of the strike. The moment is in many ways suitable for politics to take the place of murder. To any future changes (in the constitution of Northern Ireland) the people of Northern Ireland as a whole must assent.

Telegraph: The Telegraph believes Mrs Thatcher's visit to Dublin has been a success in that she has persuaded the Taoiseach to accept her position on the H-Block protest while at the same time substantially improving relations between the two countries. It supports Mrs Thatcher's interpretation of the talks that the constitutional position of Northern Ireland has not been jeopardised by the talks despite the overtones of moves towards Irish unity contained in the communiqué. Despite the obvious difficulties it welcomes the new approach to the Northern Ireland problem.

The Sunday Telegraph editorial (14th December) suggests that the Dublin talks were primarily about the H-Block issue and the desire of Mrs Thatcher to try to offset the possible repercussions of an IRA campaign in the event of a death, by increasing cooperation with the Republic. It doubts both Mr Haughey's optimism and Mr Paisley's pessimism in relation to the talks and suggests that the meeting has provided the Taoiseach with a political boost in return for a reasonable approach on the H-Block issue.

Mail: Editorial (10th December) is very favourable impressed with the political will of both Mrs Thatcher and the Taoiseach to bring about changes in Anglo-Irish relations and supports any initiative which would have the effect of bringing Ireland and Britain closer together.

Star: Editorial (15th December) strongly criticises Mrs Thatcher's refusal to disclose information on the Dublin talks particularly as it believes that there may have been some dramatic agreements reached.

Economist: The editorial (13th December) does not place any particular significance on the different interpretations given to the outcome of the meeting, this is considered normal. The editorial indicated its support for the latest proposals to examine relationships between Ireland and Britain insofar as it might provide for a mutually acceptable form of association between North and South of Ireland without threatening the North's "right to remain part of the United Kingdom so long as a majority wishes, but tempting enough over time to wean Northern Protestants away from their dependence on Britain".

Observer: Editorial (14th December) which was written by Conor Cruise O'Brien, strongly condemns Mrs Thatcher's refusal to disclose information on the talks particularly as it considers them to have covered significant matters with far reaching consequences. It points out that claims made with reference to "constitutional" matters in the Dail have not yet been denied in the Commons. If on the other hand the talks did more than boost the Taoiseach's political ambitions in return for support on the H-Block issue then it would follow that the only beneficiaries will be the Taoiseach, Paisley and the IRA. George Brock's article in the same issue of the paper accepts that the talks were much more than a political ploy, that the wording of the communiqué suggests a very real change in the British Government's intentions towards Northern Ireland. \

Reports in the popular press are generally agreed that the purpose of the Dublin visit was to try and avert a crisis over H-Block. While the Mail and Mirror are optimistic about the new closer relationship which might result the Sun and Express have tended to downgrade the importance of the talks (Reports on 12th by Terry and Warden).

While the issue of H-Block has not been divorced in the press reports from that of the visit the emphasis given by the press differed quite considerably. The Telegraph editorials are particularly sensitive on the point. Prior to the visit

its editorials were openly suspicious that Mrs Thatcher might be persuaded to grant concessions amounting to political status and after the visit it suggests that Mrs Thatcher got support for her handling of the H-Block issue in return for a gesture in favour of Irish Unity. The message conveyed in editorials in the Mail and Express was similar. They suggested that Mr Haughey's Support for the H-Block position of the British Government was an essential precondition before any meaningful discussions could take place. The Economist also suggested that the only logical way in which the threat of violence (killings or hunger strikes) could have been averted was for Mrs Thatcher and Mr Haughey to maintain a mutually agreed policy on the issue of the H-Blocks and thus deny extremists on both sides the opportunity of exploiting hunger strikers. To arrive at a mutually agreed policy it suggests Mr Haughey has to show restraint and Mrs Thatcher to express humanitarian concern.

Yours sincerely

Dáithí

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