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Oifig an Taoisigh
Office of the Taoiseach

November, 1985.

SECRET AND PERSONAL

The Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher,
Prime Minister.

Dear Margaret

Dick Spring and Peter Barry have had two useful meetings with Geoffrey Howe and Tom King since I received your letter of 4th October. Our officials on both sides have done a good job in trying to work out common ground but I believe that contact at the political level is essential so that our two Governments can be confident that we understand each other clearly.

I think that my colleagues were, at yesterday's meeting, able to set Tom King's mind at ease on a matter which is, of course, a common concern to us both, viz. security co-operation between us. It is important that we have no doubts about each other's commitment on this crucial issue and I believe that all misunderstandings have now been eliminated.

Having heard Dick's and Peter's account of yesterday's exchange, I must say, however, that we for our part have a very serious concern about one central aspect of the implementation of what we are seeking to do, involving a number of matters relating to the Intergovernmental Conference and the Secretariat, which we regard as essential, viz.

1. That all meetings of the Conference be held in Belfast;

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2. That the Secretariat be located in offices at Stormont, from the first meeting of the Conference onwards and that its office and residential accommodation be secure and adequate;
3. That the two Heads of the Secretariat be officials of a rank compatible with the importance to both of us of this Agreement, and be selected as people in whom each of us has special confidence.

The business of the Agreement which we are now close to concluding is centred on co-operation between our Governments over a range of matters in relation to Northern Ireland. It is, in my belief, essential both for credibility and effectiveness, that the Conference meet in Belfast from the beginning and that its Secretariat be established there on a continuing basis in or near the building where the Conference is to meet, which I understand to be Stormont House.

Tom King has explained very clearly, and we understand, the difficulties that he faces. We believe, however, that any temporising about the implementation of this would be seen as weakness and could create the risk that our two Governments would be back in the situation of May 1974 when an important and promising political effort was damaged by divided counsels and consequent hesitations. I know that Tom's concern is with security and with the desirability of minimising tensions at a time of considerable unionist anxiety. Our belief is, however, that there are some difficulties that simply must be faced by both of us. Any delays or hesitations would only serve to make the implementation of these elements more difficult as time went on.

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The Secretariat is an integral part of the machinery of the Conference and we believe its establishment on a continuing basis is essential to the success of what we are trying to achieve together. We have made it clear that it is not the purpose of the Secretariat to act as a public complaints bureau or as a public access office, but to service the Conference during and between its formal meetings and to provide a central point of communication.

It seems to me that the essence of what we are trying to do is to intensify co-operation between our Governments on matters arising from the problems of Northern Ireland in a number of spheres, notably the political, security and economic areas. I am absolutely convinced that, to give substance to this commitment, there must be the closest possible communication between those centres in our Governments to which you and I assign responsibility on these matters. Without a Secretariat operating on a continuing basis in Belfast we would not be able to have the sort of communication that will ensure that the two Governments avoid running into problems unnecessarily, or be able to create the clear understanding essential to heightened co-operation.

I have with Peter Barry decided to nominate a senior official from the Department of Foreign Affairs to be the Irish joint head of the Secretariat precisely because I am confident that his whole approach will be to co-operate and create common understanding through the Secretariat with officialdom on the other side. This is an officer who was at one time my diplomatic adviser and who has been involved from the beginning in the current discussions between our Governments.

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As I have said we envisage that the Irish side of the Secretariat would involve initially, besides this officer, only two posts at senior level with two at secretarial level. One of the two senior posts would be filled by officers competent in security co-operation matters to which we both attach great importance, while the other post would deal with general affairs.

I have to say that we are concerned about the difficulty which your authorities are finding in identifying accommodation in the Stormont complex which would meet conditions which we would regard as necessary to provide for five people to work and live at any one time even in the most limited circumstances. We have made it very clear that there is no question, for example, of family members being involved at this stage. I gather that the best that has been suggested is an isolated temporary structure. While we understand that there are administrative limitations on space, to me this suggestion is not consistent with concern about security or even ordinary standards of decent accommodation.

On both sides we are now approaching fundamental decisions about whether to proceed or not with what is now before us. It is only right that I should let you know in complete frankness that, so far as we are concerned, it is essential that clear understandings are reached now in relation to the matters addressed above, and are implemented in full from the beginning. I would hope that Robert Armstrong will be able to reassure Dermot Nally fully about these matters when our officials meet again on Tuesday next.