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cc PS Taoiseach
Mr. Nally ✓ PSE
Mr. M. Humphreys / Mr. Thompson
Rox.

20 September, 1988.

Mr. Dermot Gallagher,
Assistant Secretary,
Department of Foreign Affairs.

A meeting with Charles Powell, Private Secretary to
the Prime Minister

I called by appointment on Powell at 10 Downing Street and we spoke for over an hour in the Cabinet room. I said I was not calling on instruction; rather, I wished to renew personal contact after the summer and to stay in ongoing touch with him in a general way. He said he too thought that we should continue to meet informally, that just now I might have more to say to him than he to me, and that he assumed I might wish to give him a run-down on the present situation as I saw it. He said that it had been a very rough summer and that Mrs. Thatcher and other Ministers were very concerned about the "new IRA wave". He had been called back from Italy when she returned from Cornwall and, he said, there has not been much of a let-up since. She has been focussing on Ireland more than at any time since 1984-5.

I gave Powell a long (20 minute) exposé of our perspectives at the present time. Powell heard me out carefully and, it seemed, attentively, asking for clarification or amplification from time to time. I covered the Taoiseach's U.S. and Australian speeches, extradition, Gibraltar, the Agreement/devolution, Stalker/Sampson, Thain, the Birmingham Six, the Guildford Four and Maguires (basically, wider Irish perceptions of British justice), cross-border security, and the Taoiseach's philosophy toward dialogue with the Unionists. Powell said he was glad to have these perspectives. The trouble is, he said, that "she is so difficult". "She gets onto grooves and won't come off them". "She doesn't see the Agreement". He could not exaggerate, he said, how upset she gets when soldiers are killed in Northern Ireland (I took from him, as from others who make this point, the sense that she may not get quite so upset when other than "her boys" are killed). She "goes mad" with Younger and King. She "gives them hell" and "blames them to their faces for the deaths of her soldiers". If the Taoiseach thinks that she is difficult to handle - and he would not blame him if he did - it is really nothing in comparison to what she is like with her own Ministers.

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As to her relationship with the Taoiseach, Powell said he has been surprised by the fact that they get on better when they meet than he would have expected from the mood before such meetings. Their relationship "is much better when they are together than when they are not". He meant, he said, that "despite difficulties and clear differences, both on issues and in style and approach as between them", he (the Taoiseach) struck Powell as able to "cross the space" between them. He thought that the meetings which they have had over the past year or so have all been helpful and, he said, they should have further meetings. He was probably referring to meetings en marge of European Summits. I did not try to lead him into any comments on the possibility of a special summit meeting and he did not touch on it either.

Repeating that "she does not see the Agreement", and at my request that he elaborate on this, he said:

- Her commitment to the Agreement is total and she will never go back on that. The Unionists let her down very badly (Paisley and Molyneux when they went back on their word). The Agreement is utterly safe with her as she sees it.
- For her, though, it is "like a picture hanging on the wall". It is "just there". Only the security side of it is what interests her and, he had to say, after the Summer's events, "you can hardly blame her for that". She is fixated on getting at the IRA and she always returns to her hobbyhorse - pre-emptive intelligence.
- He would stress that for her the day-to-day implementation of the Agreement is something that she is hardly aware of. She leaves all that to Tom King. That is the way she is with everything, not just the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The "spotlight mind" image used about her is right : she probes around, illuminating new areas which she looks into for a while and then moves on "having, she thinks, solved whatever it was", and "hating to have to come back a second time for re-runs. Re-runs are a waste of time for her". This approach may not suit all problems. Indeed, it does not. He would agree if I said that the Northern Ireland problem, and the Agreement, can not be run like that. "But there you are".

Whatever about all this, he said, he wanted us to know that the letters (he mentioned a letter from the Taoiseach "to which she has now replied") have been seen as helpful. The responses made by the Taoiseach were appreciated, he said. He asked how I thought the Taoiseach viewed "the relationship and the present state of affairs" in general terms.

I said I had been present on one occasion when the Taoiseach had made a number of points with some emphasis : it was not his or his Government's Agreement, but he had committed his Government to working it and this, obviously, was being done on the Irish side; security has been discussed substantively at the majority of meetings since his Government took office; he has heard her out on a number of issues which particularly pre-occupied her - bees in her bonnet - and has now responded to her on them. He feels that he has acted in good faith on the Agreement and on extradition where the previous Government had not succeeded in delivering on its undertaking and postponed for a year the implementation of the new measures, an unwelcome inheritance to the new

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Government particularly in the context of very real and wide concern about aspects of British justice (I argued that the point here was not the quality of British justice but public perceptions of this : the essential difference being between the object and the object seen). On the other hand, the Taoiseach found that these efforts were met with a series of events swinging back and forth like a pendulum : Stalker/Sampson, the McAnespie killing, the Thain incident, Gibraltar and so on. It would be hard to avoid thinking that someone, somewhere, was not willing some of it. Thus, from the Taoiseach's viewpoint, all reasonable efforts were being made to make the Agreement and the relationship work. On the security front we have had successes, and the single greatest - by far - police/army operation (Mallard) in the history of our State had taken place in recent months. It seemed, on the other hand, however, that some incidents, and some decisions taken in London, were, rather, having the effect of helping the IRA and damaging the Agreement which London stood over so strongly in principle but, in his own words, was being treated at top level in London like "a picture on the wall". I said that, personally speaking, I was worried at the extent to which there might be a considerable divergence in perception from the foregoing at the top level in London. There was also, I thought, a serious inability at the top in London to understand what the Taoiseach was at vis-a-vis the Unionists outside the framework of the Agreement (as, it seemed, nothing would be possible within that framework).

Having heard out the foregoing with, I believe, interest, Powell said he felt that he genuinely saw my points about each of these difficulties as seen from our side (I had stressed that the Taoiseach had been emphatic in his description of how he had tried to make the thing work across a broad front but found the major difficulties arising gratuitously from incidents or decisions outside his control). He said that, overall, and "in the round" however, he thought that the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister were "in business". He said it seemed to him that, whereas he will probably do just another year in Downing Street, he felt that the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach looked to be in business for quite some time to come.

Powell referred several times to the recent Ministerial meetings presided over by Mrs. Thatcher. He confirmed what Anthony Teasdale said (Geoffrey Howe's Political Adviser) : that the main element in those meetings was the drawing up of a new way to co-ordinate, as between Ministers and services, the response to future crises of a security nature. He also mentioned the review of measures to respond to terrorism. Some measures are in hand already, he said; some will emerge over a period, and some will require legislation. There is not, he said, any spectacular star-wars type package of measures, in case (wryly) we had drawn wide conclusions from speculation in the media. (This indeed also confirms Teasdale's comments in this area.)

Powell asked what was happening about the review of the workings of the Conference. He said, now that he thought about it, he was surprised that they have not yet seen anything on their side; he thought he might raise this with Howe and King. I said I understood that a paper might be in hand in the Secretariat and that this would probably set out orientations for Ministers on both sides. I had heard, I said, some talk in London of possible approaches, including, perhaps, using the prospect of the review process to tease the Unionists forward toward dialogue. Powell said he saw no difficulty with that as long as the Agreement itself did not become a card in the pack.

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Of one thing he was absolutely certain, he said: the text of the Agreement would not sustain alteration; "if we try to do that the Agreement would be finished", he said. His own instinct at this stage, without having given it much thought, he said, was to approach it rather as Heads of Government approach European Councils : to give impetus and direction in a number of specifically difficult and important areas, and to publicly re-affirm their purpose for the following period.

Overall, at this meeting, Powell was, I felt, relatively frank and forthcoming. He said afterward that the exposé of some perspectives from the Dublin standpoint would be helpful for him, and he would like to talk again. We agreed to meet for lunch in October.

Yours sincerely,


RICHARD RYAN
Minister-Counsellor