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THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND

CHURCH HOUSE.
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From the Clerk of the General Assembly and General Secretary
The Very Rev. Thomas J. Simpson, M.A., T.L.B., Dip. Ed., D.D.

7th February, 1989.

Dear Taiioseach,

I am enclosing for your consideration a copy of a Submission by the Government Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland with regard to the review of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. A copy is also being sent to the Secretary of State at the Northern Ireland Office.

Yours sincerely,

T.J.SIMPSON.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND

GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

SUBMISSION RE ANGLO-IRISH AGREEMENT

1. The Government Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland submits the following comments on the Anglo-Irish Agreement which the Governments in London and Dublin are presently reviewing.

2. The general aims of the Agreement, to procure peace, stability and prosperity thus promoting reconciliation, are aims with which all right thinking people agree. That such aims have not been realised over the past three years raises serious doubts over the successful outworking of the Agreement. While British and Irish politicians have been at pains to praise its achievements and its permanency, no such general support has been given to it by the Northern Ireland public at large. The Agreement has, undoubtedly, helped co-operation between the British and Irish Governments but it has not had a corresponding result in Northern Ireland itself.

3. The Agreement was signed amid a political euphoria which ignored the practical realities of the situation, some of which we now indicate.

4. There were, without doubt, differing interpretations of the nature of the Agreement and the Irish Government's participation in it. The British Government appeared to believe that the Irish Government had only the right to make representations on matters of concern to them and to the nationalist population of Northern Ireland: the Irish Government was convinced, it would seem, that with the right to make representations there was also an obligation resting on the British Government to take effective action on those representations largely irrespective of other political responsibilities.

5. The Irish Government was, apparently, convinced that changes could be brought about more easily than was, in fact, possible. What the Irish Government called for to be done, the British Government found itself unable to 'deliver'. This basic misunderstanding has been a constant cause of embarrassment and frustration.

6. The British Government, undoubtedly, saw the Agreement as a means by which, through co-operation, terrorism would be defeated by the apprehension of those accused of murder or other terrorist offences, their extradition and their trial in British or Irish courts. To little account was taken, however, of historic grass-roots resistance in Ireland to the trial of Irish citizens in British courts.

7. The lack of meaningful and orderly consultation by the British Government with the unionist section of the population, while the drafting of the Agreement was taking place, has created a feeling of alienation among the latter. There is the conviction in some responsible circles that loyalists were being alienated intentionally and unnecessarily. While the Irish Government presented the views and concerns of the nationalist community in Northern Ireland, the British Government claimed to hold 'the middle ground'. It appeared to Unionists that there had been an attempt to 'face them down'. Instead of obtaining the co-operation of unionists the Agreement was, and still is, opposed by the very large majority of them. This is not, simply, the result of intransigence, as some British and Irish politicians contend but arises

because the Anglo-Irish Agreement was perceived to have been structured to discount their own political interests as a lawful majority in Northern Ireland. This continues to cause deeply felt hurt.

8. The international climate of opinion has not, on the whole, been helpful to the British position on Northern Ireland nor to the Unionist stance. While, with exceptions, giving no overt support to the methods of the I.R.A. there has been much sympathy for the aim of that organisation, an Ireland united and separate from the United Kingdom whatever the democratic choice of those immediately involved. There has been a successful propaganda campaign to present Britain as an old-fashioned colonial power in its attitude to Ireland.

9. In spite of the Anglo-Irish Agreement violence continues and the I.R.A. retains the initiative in its immediate aim of preventing a return to peace, stability and prosperity. Until terrorism is terminated reconciliation will prove difficult if not impossible. While co-operation between the forces of law and order, North and South, may have improved lasting benefits from the Anglo-Irish Agreement appear to be few in number.

10. In the political scene there is urgent need for dialogue so that a way forward toward restoring local democracy in Northern Ireland, may be found. So as to achieve this our position has been one of temporary suspension of the working of the Agreement. The British and Irish Governments must state clearly how they are prepared to encourage such dialogue. British Government spokes-persons have stated that in the event of talks taking place the Agreement would be operated "sensitively" or "flexibly". They must now spell out clearly what 'sensitively' and 'flexibly' mean so as to encourage talks to take place. Local politicians must be given room to negotiate, and time to deliberate, both by their grass roots support and by the two respective Governments. Unless positive steps are taken to promote such an atmosphere for dialogue suspicion will remain that, whatever the protestation, one or more of the parties involved are content to prolong the present impasse.

11. At this time of re-appraisal the Government Committee of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, in their commitment to peace and reconciliation, call upon the British and Irish Governments and the political parties to demonstrate a willingness to seek for solutions rather than persist in self-justifying confrontation. The lack of co-operation within Northern Ireland, to which the Anglo-Irish Agreement has contributed, has been a major cause for mistrust to many in the unionist community and to constitutional nationalists.

12. The Committee welcome the initiative taken at Duisburg and would encourage representatives of the participating parties to persevere in their search for progress. The tragic cost of our present situation demands that such initiatives be continued and supported. The Committee believe that there is an urgent need for leadership towards a new era of hope, co-operation and mutual trust. Here churches, politicians and leaders in all sections of society have a role to play acting with courage, integrity, trustworthiness and openness both towards their own communities and towards those from whom they have been traditionally divided.