



An Chartlann Náisiúnta National Archives

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Anglo-Irish aspects of the Taoiseach's Meeting with
Prime Minister Major

1. The following is an attempt to spell out some of the ideas mentioned at a meeting with the Taoiseach on 29 November.

Taoiseach's aim

2. It is assumed that a principal aim on the part of the Taoiseach will be his wish to get across to the Prime Minister the need for Heads of Governments on both sides to "take a grip" on the problem and create a framework within which a genuine settlement can be reached.

Unfavourable aspects of present situation

3. At first sight the situation may seem unfavourable for such an approach. The Prime Minister will be preoccupied with his own political problems and his negotiating strategy for Maastricht. He will also no doubt have with him the Northern Ireland Secretary, Peter Brooke whose advice to him will be very influential if not decisive. That advice will almost certainly be directed to ensuring that Brooke himself is allowed to get on with his "initiative" and that his efforts to bring the Unionists into dialogue are not damaged or overtaken by some new initiative or framework set by the two Heads of Government.
4. Furthermore it is possible that Prime Minister Major will be briefed to press us again on some security issues which we would regard as "old chestnuts" (such as Army to Army communication) and it is just possible - but unlikely - that he will raise such issues as internment

or border closure which are featured in some recent briefings by British Army sources. (We can expect however that any security issues he may raise will be presented with an eye to the Taoiseach's sensitivities - that is not in the accusing or polemic style of Mrs Thatcher but as a concern which he believes both Governments share.)

Aspects favourable to new thinking

5. Even though, for the reasons just noted, the situation may not seem very favourable for an effort to get Major involved in some new approach, nevertheless there are elements in the present situation which could be built on; and which, taken together, offer some hope that the Taoiseach might be able to engage Major's attention in the way which he wants.
6. A first, general point is that, from past experience we know that an effort to engage the British at a high level such as we are now thinking of, is best conducted on a planned basis over time. The British are not monolithic in their approach and an initial unwillingness to consider ideas is not always the end of the story. The starting point for whatever effort the Taoiseach might wish to make now is certainly more favourable than it was in the early '80s with Mrs Thatcher; and yet she was brought eventually to accept ideas to which she was very negative at the outset.
7. A second point is that while John Major probably does not know a great deal about Northern Ireland, his general approach to this as to any other problem is likely to be a pragmatic one without any of the "ideological baggage" which Mrs Thatcher would have brought to the issue. He probably accepts in principle that Northern Ireland should be a priority issue for a British Government while

in practice content enough so far to leave it for the moment in the apparently capable hands of Peter Brooke. This means that it should be possible in the right circumstances to persuade him to move the issue up on his agenda - especially if he is shown an approach which could offer a new way forward.

8. A third point is that certain private comments made to us by the British side, although focussed in the first instance on the security issue, suggest that some people at least might be ready to think about a fresh approach. John Chilcot, the (relatively new) Permanent Secretary of the Northern Ireland Office has spoken several times recently about the fact that both Governments, over many years, have invested very substantial resources and effort in security "and yet we are not winning". It may be that this "musing" is no more than a prelude to some further pressure on us on "old chestnut" issues in the security field. But it might also indicate a beginning, at official level at least, of thinking on the lines of "where are we going after more than twenty years of effort?". It would be over-sanguine to suggest that this is a sign that there is already deep and serious thinking on the British side about the way forward but it might indicate some willingness to listen to new ideas from the Taoiseach's side.

9. A fourth element of interest at present is the contacts which we have reason to believe have been taking place through various channels (the chaplains, John Hume etc.) with Sinn Féin or members of the "Army Council" directed to persuading the IRA to call off the violence. Some of these contacts are highly confidential and it is not clear how far anything substantial will result from them. However it seems quite possible, granted past experience of the British approach on this kind of thing, that the British side may have its own lines out in some way to

the IRA or their surrogates. Perhaps some of the contacts like those of the chaplains which appear to us to have "run into the sand" may have been taken further by the British on their side once the initial connection had been made by the intermediaries?

10. (In any case even if the British are not engaged in any serious contacts of this kind, they are at least aware of such contacts by intermediaries such as the chaplains (and no doubt also John Hume). In the privacy of a tete-a-tete, Major would probably expect the Taoiseach to give some assessment from his view-point of whether or not this is a fruitful path to follow.)
11. A fifth point is that the radical changes in the Soviet Union and in Central and Eastern Europe, the conflict in Yugoslavia and the new and radical steps forward which the Community is nerving itself to take at Maastricht all have a certain psychological effect in "relativising" the long standing problem between the communities in Northern Ireland. This does not necessarily mean that the problem on the ground is any easier to resolve. But it should mean that someone like Major, preoccupied with these important changes on the international scene, might be more ready to be persuaded to see Northern Ireland in its true proportions as a soluble (?) problem to be addressed with a fresh approach by both Governments. The question must be "at a time of changing relationships between all of us within the Community, and in all of Europe, what can we now do about Northern Ireland?".
12. Finally there is the point that, as time drifts on and Unionist statements such as that of Paisley at the weekend remain uncompromising, it seems less and less credible to rest our hopes solely on the "Brooke Talks". Of course Brooke himself would argue that some such approach will be necessary either before or after an

election, so why not do the preliminary work now? And certainly Major will not want to abandon the "Brooke approach" at this point. Nevertheless it might be possible at a tete-a-tete to begin the process of opening Major's mind to a more fundamental policy approach - perhaps be getting him to agree in the first instance to the concept of more regular Anglo-Irish summits to develop Anglo-Irish, as well as North-South, aspects of the relationship.

Conclusion

13. This note is not intended to suggest that it will be easy to get Prime Minister Major at this summit to agree to a new approach. He is likely to be very preoccupied with Maastricht and with his own electoral prospects; and he will be reluctant to take the ball away from Peter Brooke at this stage, granted that Brooke himself will urge strongly that he be allowed to continue the game.
14. Nevertheless the points outlined above suggest that the situation is not wholly unfavourable from our view-point; and that, notwithstanding Major's pre-occupations, the climate is a bit more favourable for fresh thinking than it has been on various occasions in the past.
15. The key to any approach to the British I suggest is to show them what it can offer, if successful, from their point of view. The points outlined above suggest reasons why they might be a bit more receptive at this point to a presentation which offered a basis for some new thinking. It would be difficult however at this summit to get Major to agree to take any substantial step on the new road. But it could be a very significant result if he came to accept the idea that some fresh thinking may be required.

16. At this stage therefore, I would suggest that the Taoiseach's aim might be:-

- (a) To engage Major's attention for the need, at a time of change throughout Europe, to develop some new thinking on Northern Ireland
- (b) To get him to agree to the need for regular (annual ?) Anglo-Irish summit meetings. It could help to persuade him of this if stress were laid, not just on Northern Ireland but on the wider range of Anglo-Irish relationships in the new post-1992 situation
- (c) As a first step, to get him to agree to a further summit meeting in the Spring on all aspects of Anglo-Irish relationships and
- (d) To a stepped-up arrangement at official level (Butler/Nally ?) to study and prepare for such a meeting.

N. Dorr
Secretary
2 December, 1991