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**Reference Code:** 2021/99/13

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## Taoiseach and Tanaiste's Meeting with the Prime Minister

Date: 8 May 1997

Venue: 10 Downing Street

Participants: Irish Side: John Bruton, Taoiseach; Dick Spring, Tanaiste; Paddy Teahon, Secretary, Department of the Taoiseach; Sean O hUiginn, Second Secretary, Department of Foreign Affairs; Ted Barrington, Ambassador, London.

British Side: Tony Blair, Prime Minister; Robin Cook, Foreign Secretary; Mo Mowlam, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; Jonathan Powell, Principal Private Secretary; John Holmes, Private Secretary; Quentin Thomas, Political Director, Northern Ireland Office.

### Agenda

1. The Taoiseach congratulated the new Prime Minister on Labour's election victory and thanked him for agreeing to the meeting so soon after the election and the formation of the Government. He suggested three main topics for discussion - Europe, East-West cooperation and Northern Ireland - with which the Prime Minister agreed.

### European Union

2. The Taoiseach welcomed the stance adopted by the new Labour Government on the European Union especially on the Social Charter. He looked forward to the European Council in Amsterdam and said he was interested in the Prime Minister's assessment of the prospects for the Council. He also asked for the British views on Schengen and Economic and Monetary Union.

3. Cook said that the Labour Government were anxious to avoid an approach which would force Britain to opt out of Schengen. While they would want to maintain their legal rights on border controls and immigration, they wanted to cooperate on and make progress in the wider Justice and Home Affairs area. They saw cooperation on these issues as lying within pillar three rather than the first pillar. Britain and Ireland had similar views on a number of issues for Amsterdam and he hoped we could go to the Council with a common position.

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4. The Taoiseach said that we shared Britain's caution on the question of flexibility. He pointed out that the draft Treaty prepared under the Irish Presidency contained important new provisions against crime and drug trafficking and he hoped that Britain could support these in the final text. On the question of the size of the Commission he said that Ireland would insist on the right of each member State to nominate a full member of the Commission.

5. Blair outlined Britain's overall approach to the European Union. He wanted to preserve and develop the Single Market; to ensure flexibility in labour markets with a minimum of regulation; to proceed with CAP reform, which he recognised would be a matter of particular concern to Ireland; to move towards enlargement; and to make the necessary institutional changes. On the size of the Commission and voting he said that Britain would want to ensure that "a fair balance" was maintained. On monetary policy he emphasised that the decision to give operational independence to the Bank of England on interest rates was not, and should not be seen as, a preliminary move towards British entry to EMU. A decision on EMU would be taken on the basis of an assessment of what was in Britain's national economic interest. Recalling that he had been in Ireland over the Christmas period Blair said that he was "amazed" at the rapid and visible development in the Irish economy (when the Tanaiste jokingly observed that we had only shown him the good bits, Cook responded "at least you have good bits to show people"). The Taoiseach pointed out that Ireland's development had importance for Britain also and that Ireland was now Britain's fifth biggest export market in the world. Cook acknowledged this remarking that Ireland's positive experience within the Union could have an impact on the European debate in Britain.

6. Later in the meeting the Prime Minister returned to the European issue to stress the importance of the Amsterdam Council. It would be a test of whether a different relationship between Britain and its European partners worked. To turn around attitudes in Britain he needed to show that constructive engagement brought results. A setback at the IGC would make it more difficult for him to change things. It was likely that the Tory Party would be "pretty Eurosceptic" in opposition and it would be important for him to show that there was a better way of doing business with Europe. A setback rather than success at Amsterdam would have a negative effect in the country. He couldn't overstate the importance of this.

7. The Taoiseach felt that the more cooperative approach outlined by Blair would help change attitudes to Britain amongst its European partners.

Returning to institutional issues, he said that there were specific problems in the way the Commission worked and its capacity to provide leadership. Santer had explained to him how little authority he had over his fellow Commissioners.

8. Responding to the Taoiseach Cook said that on his visits to Bonn and Paris he had received a warm response to the new British approach and a willingness to contemplate a fresh start. They still however had problems with the Commission (he mentioned that there were two specific cases where the Commission was being unhelpful) which could colour public opinion. Blair said sardonically that he had "some experience of Santer" during the election campaign. A speech made by the President of the Commission had been seen as interference in Britain's internal affairs at a sensitive moment and had given an opening to the Tories. It had not been helpful.

9. The Taoiseach raised the wider importance of the European Union in preserving peace on the continent commenting that Helmut Kohl, whom he knew well, was committed to the project which he saw in a broad historical perspective. The Tanaiste added that the German objective was not to dominate Europe but a real desire to anchor Germany in the Union.

10. Blair replied that he "believed in European integration". The questions at issue were its pace, shape and content. In taking the process forward Governments had to bring their peoples with them. Otherwise they would feel that they had lost control and would end up blaming Europe for failures of policy. He had discussed this recently with the President of Brazil who had explained to him how in creating Mercosur they had tried to learn from the mistakes of the Europeans. If Europe moved too fast there was a real risk of a backlash; it should be possible to make people feel happy with the pace of integration.

11. The Taoiseach asked Blair if he could see specific problems for Britain in the period ahead. Blair replied that, as he saw it, the key questions arose out of the problems of "smaller versus larger" states in the context of enlargement. He also saw difficulties in the foreign policy area where the Union should not attempt to run before it had learned to walk. In addition he had concerns about the Union's democratic credibility. The European Parliament was simply not a credible body; he doubted for example that anybody in Britain could name their MEP. The IGC should agree those changes necessary to bring about enlargement but there "should not be too much integration elsewhere". We

should avoid measures that could provoke an anti-European backlash. He acknowledged that this was less likely in Ireland where the experience of the Union and the history of involvement with the Union had been positive, but he thought that for other member States there could be a real danger.

### East West Cooperation

12. The Taoiseach said he saw considerable scope for developing East-West cooperation in the light of the priorities of the new British Government. He identified as areas for such cooperation: education; the information society including the UK National Grid for learning and the University for Industry; crime; homelessness; the environment; food standards. Pointing out that Britain and Ireland shared one labour market and one educational market he said that we saw scope for Ireland's making a contribution as well as deriving benefits from intensified cooperation in these areas. There could, for example, be joint action between the proposed British Food Agency and Ireland's Food Safety Board who could share expertise and perhaps identify cost savings. On the environment he welcomed the emphasis that the Labour Government was giving to the international dimension. We had a particular difficulty over Sellafield but both countries did have a wider and shared interest in the Irish Sea and in the marine environment between the two islands. Overall he felt that such cooperation would provide a more positive context, an umbrella, under which North-South cooperation could more easily operate.

13. Mowlam welcomed the Taoiseach's approach. The Prime Minister added that the overall concept was a good idea and the specific proposals were worth looking at. He asked John Holmes how the idea could be progressed. Holmes said that the Cabinet Office would be in the lead on the British side and suggested that the way forward was to set up a meeting at official level. Blair agreed. The two sides agreed to work towards a joint statement on the initiative to be issued at the time of the special European Council on 23 May.

### Northern Ireland

14. The Prime Minister asked the Taoiseach for his assessment of the prospects of an IRA ceasefire. The Taoiseach said that it was a most difficult issue to read. A chicken and egg situation had developed on the question of the link between an IRA ceasefire and Sinn Fein's entry to the talks. John Major had been reluctant to set a date for Sinn Fein's entry. As a result the IRA were not

put on the spot and this had allowed them effectively to opt out. He did not want to press the Prime Minister to make a decision on this issue just now if he was not ready for it, but it was a matter that both sides would have to address soon. The question was could the British Government envisage a date for Sinn Fein entry if there were a credible ceasefire of the quality that we all wanted, including for example an end to punishment beatings? He welcomed the Secretary of State's statement on parades, and agreed with her on the need to uphold the rule of law and the desirability of local agreement. We should try to get the ceasefire issue dealt with before the parades issue hotted up and contributed to an intensification of sectarian tensions in Northern Ireland. He supported what the Secretary of State had said on confidence building measures. In this context he took the opportunity to mention the importance of prisons issues, the cases of Roisin McAliskey and Danny McNamee, and Bloody Sunday where there might be a need for a fresh enquiry. The Taoiseach also emphasised the importance of confidence building measures for the Unionist side; he understood that Unionists too felt isolated and would have to be given confidence in the process. He was not clear what precisely was called for in this respect, but we would be willing to take risks in this regard if we were satisfied nationalist concerns were also being dealt with.

15. The Prime Minister thanked the Taoiseach for his assessment and his views. He pointed out that he had been in Government for less than a week and that he had to be careful as he and his colleagues considered the right moves. It would make things more difficult if he appeared to move under pressure. Both traditions had to be brought along. He believed it would be possible to do this. He was looking at the way forward, taking stock of the situation, and considering the best way to give the process fresh impetus. He had to keep in mind that action taken on one side could have effects on the other. He did not want to rush into premature actions that could hinder progress. The more calls that were made publicly for decisions on "X", "Y" or "Z" the more difficult it would be. On confidence-building measures the Government would look at what could be done. What did the IRA intend to do? Was there internal pressure to restore the ceasefire?

16. The Taoiseach said that last October we had been told by the Republican Movement that if John Major published certain proposals the ceasefire would be restored. We were getting strong signals that some in the Movement still wanted an early restoration of the ceasefire. They referred back to the conditions set out in October, but we were not clear on the precise context and form they had in mind - whether more full-hearted than before, or "pressing the

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same buttons" and getting the same response. It was not clear whether they realised the damage they had done and the need to rebuild trust. Sinn Fein must realise that if they did not act now they would find it increasingly difficult to influence the negotiations. The talks would resume in a few weeks; after 6 to 8 months they would arrive at a point of decision; at that stage Sinn Fein would be faced with a fait accompli. The time to play their best card was in the next few months.

17. The Prime Minister said that the new Government had the issue "hugely under focus"; he wanted to give the matter "focus and impetus". But he did want to say frankly that he had to move on it in his own time and in his own way. He would try to provide impetus in a manner that did not dislodge the entire process. Whatever imperatives were on the Irish Government and the US, if people walked away we were all back square one. He believed that it was possible to achieve something more but he had to be extremely circumspect. The collapse of the ceasefire seemed to justify the argument that the IRA were not sincere. It raised huge doubts in the mind of public opinion. We had to ensure that any new ceasefire was genuine and permanent.

18. The Taoiseach said that we had the potential channel of official contact with Sinn Fein, as indeed the British themselves had. We could reopen that channel as a way of testing the ground. The talks process was cumbersome because it was designed to enable Sinn Fein to come in. We should make further effort to do so; we should not allow the situation to drift. In some senses people might be willing to respond to a radical step now from the new Government that they would not be prepared to do in six months time. The Tanaiste added that he was not sure how long the Belfast talks could be kept going. They could quickly run out of steam. We had come close to that in the last round and in some respects the talks process had been saved by the intervening British election.

19. Blair said that he had the "sense of time" well in mind; he was "totally seized of the importance and issue of timing". He was aware of being under scrutiny by two sets of watchful eyes. The Taoiseach said that he was not trying to put pressure on. He had set out his position in seeking to have Mr. Major accept the admission of Sinn Fein after the Christmas recess on the basis of a ceasefire in November. He would not now resile from that position. He realised the dangers. There was a risk that the Unionists would walk out if Sinn Fein were brought in. But what was there to fear from testing the hypothesis? Blair replied that he was aware of that; he was keen to get Sinn Fein in. Cook

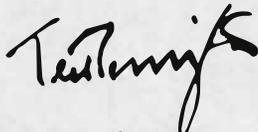
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added that the IRA had not made it any easier by their behaviour during the election campaign in particular by disrupting the Grand National and traffic on the main motor and railways. Blair agreed; the IRA's actions had a major impact on public opinion. He couldn't understand their motives. The Taoiseach said he could offer no explanation or reassurance. But he suggested that if Sinn Fein were not in the talks soon we would need to consider a radically different approach. Blair said he wanted to give the process the best chance he could. Mowlam wondered if the idea of a timescale might help; we might need to be tough with Sinn Fein, to make it clear that if they did not join the talks we would go ahead without them. (She seemed to misunderstand the Taoiseach's remarks as suggesting we flag publicly a fall-back as of now in the event the Talks failed. The Taoiseach corrected this impression.)

20. Blair asked about security cooperation. The Tanaiste said that it was first class at all levels helped at the highest levels by the existence of a great deal of personal trust between those involved.

#### UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

21. The Taoiseach raised the President's candidacy saying that he understood that the Foreign Secretary had been supportive of our request for British backing at his earlier meeting with the Tanaiste. Cook confirmed this and the Prime Minister agreed.



Ted Barrington  
Ambassador  
12 May 1997