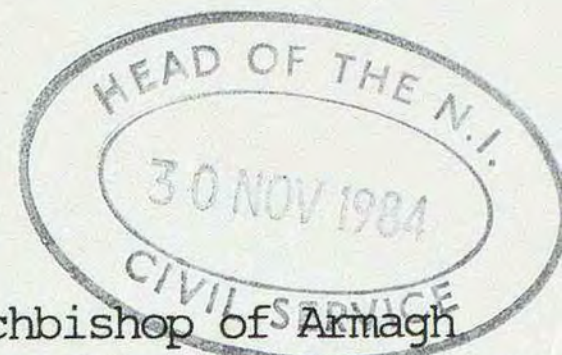


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NOTE OF THE SECRETARY OF STATE'S MEETING WITH LEADERS OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND HELD ON  
WEDNESDAY 28 NOVEMBER 1984 AT STORMONT CASTLE



Present

Secretary of State  
Mr Merifield  
Mr D J R Hill  
Mr Cleasby

Rt Rev Dr John Armstrong, Archbishop of Armagh  
Rt Rev Dr Robin Eames, Bishop of Down and Dromore  
Rt Rev Dr James Mehaffey, Bishop of Derry and Raphoe  
Rt Rev Dr Gordon McMullan, Bishop of Clogher  
Rt Rev William McCappin, Bishop of Connor

1. Following an exchange of courtesies, Dr Armstrong said that the Bishops' particular concerns related to the security situation, the Northern Ireland economy, and the prospects of political development. He thought the nationalist community had overreacted to the outcome of the Anglo-Irish summit; Bishop Cahal Daly's weekend speech had not been helpful.

2. The Secretary of State said that it was difficult to be satisfied with a security policy. The statistics showed an improving situation, but this was of no comfort to bereaved families. PIRA were a ruthless and sophisticated group of terrorists, and they posed an immense challenge to the security forces. Relationships between the RUC and the Army were good at the top, and they seemed generally satisfactory further down the two organisations. On the economic front, he agreed that unemployment levels were too high: this was both a product and a cause of the violence, though high energy and transport costs and the advent of new technology made it more difficult to stimulate employment. He had been in touch with Lord Young and invited him to study Northern Ireland's experiences.

3. Turning to the aftermath of the Summit, the Secretary of State expressed regret at the turn of events. The Irish Government felt bruised as a result of having overambitious expectations, though he suggested that HMG's position may have been unnecessarily blurred in the past. He was worried about the unionists' reaction: they glorified in what they saw as a rejection of the Republic and the SDLP by HMG, but he hoped that they would at least now feel secure enough to enter into talks with the constitutional nationalists.

4. The meeting then discussed the concept of alienation. The Secretary of State said he thought "alienation" as a descriptive term was neither accurate nor helpful: many of the minority did work with, and within, the institutions of Northern Ireland. Dr Eames said Bishop Daly had spoken in an emotive way that many Catholics would not support: it was no good making general statements, and those who wanted to argue that alienation existed should give specific examples. Dr Mehaffey said that feelings of alienation were

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very real, particularly in Londonderry. If people felt alienated, there was no point in telling them they were not. These feelings went deeper than hostility to the RUC: it was a fundamental hostility to the structure of Northern Ireland society. Sinn Fein were gaining in strength, becoming involved in social issues such as housing. Protestants who dismissed the minority's fears as groundless were wrong, and the Prime Minister's dismissal, at her press conference, of the concept of alienation had heightened these fears. Dr McMullan added that the Prime Minister's attitude had ensured that Dr Fitzgerald would be replaced by Mr Haughey, since the Irish could now see that a moderate approach did not work.

5. The Secretary of State said the central problem was what to do about the minority's fears. Repartition of Ireland was not an option, nor, in the foreseeable future, was a change in Northern Ireland's status as part of the UK. The Prime Minister's remarks should be taken in context: her objections to "alienation" were that the concept was always expressed in unsatisfactorily general terms; the publicised rejection of the Forum's options was in fact the third response to the same question, asked by different journalists, and it happened to be the briskest. But the Prime Minister was conscious of the Taoiseach's difficulties, and he thought she might seek an opportunity to correct the impressions that had been created.

6. The Secretary of State said that progress could be made, by building on areas of agreement, if the politicians would revert to working quietly and constructively. He hoped the unionist electorate would send the message to their leaders that triumphalist noises were unproductive. Were there specific measures the Bishops thought the Government could take?

7. Dr Mehaffey said that the unionist leaders would have to be put under pressure to enter into realistic discussions with the SDLP; he believed that the effect of the Summit would be to make them less, not more, generous in negotiation. They should be given a clear warning by the Government that aimless talks could not continue indefinitely. Dr Armstrong thought that Dr Mehaffey was exaggerating; he said that Mr Molyneux had offered to have talks with Mr Hume and that, plus 'The Way Forward', were signs that the UUP position was becoming less intransigent. Mr Molyneux was surrounded by some hardliners, notably Mr McCusker, but Mr Molyneux himself was privately adopting a realistic stance. Dr Paisley was the real stumbling block to progress. Bishop McCappin said it seemed doubtful that Mr Hume would be prepared to talk to Mr Molyneux. Dr McMullan and Dr Eames both suggested that the UUP would move further than their public positions suggested, provided they were seen to be doing so as a result of a scheme imposed from Westminster; Dr Eames added that the unionist leaders expected the Government to act to impose a scheme, the timing being the only uncertainty, though, as Dr McMullan pointed out,

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the UUP would delay any appearance of movement until after the 1985 local government so as not to weaken themselves in relation to the DUP. As long as the UUP were numerically strong at Westminster, which they would regard as the final arbiter, they might accept a scheme of devolved government involving participation by the minority; but the DUP would not share that position. Dr Mehaffey agreed that action by Westminster could be an effective way forward: Protestants were essentially law-abiding, and the mass protests at the imposition of direct rule had been over by the following day.

8. Dr Eames asked what role the Secretary of State saw for the Church leaders: as promoting reconciliation, or mediation, or representation not linked to the ballot box? The Secretary of State replied that he had not envisaged the Church leaders taking on a mediating role, though he would not rule it out. He envisaged there might be a role for a mediator, though he was still thinking this through. He did see the Church leaders as having roles in reconciliation and representation and was grateful for it. Dr McMullan said he saw no role for them as mediators in the formal sense, though the Bishops had been sharing their thoughts with Mr Molyneaux and (separately) Mr Hume. How did the Secretary of State see the way ahead?

9. The Secretary of State said he wanted to see progress on two fronts. On the one hand, the development of a role for the Irish Government in speaking on behalf of the nationalist minority and giving advice to HMG, though this role stopped short of any participation in executive authority in Northern Ireland. On the other hand, there should be movement towards a form of devolved administration for Northern Ireland. There were various models for this. He did not want to be drawn into suggesting a detailed blueprint at this stage, though he believed that the return of substantial powers to district councils or full integration into the UK system were not acceptable options. It followed that some form of administration at Province level, which satisfied the conditions of the 1982 Act, was the goal. In response to a question from Dr Eames, the Secretary of State said that he thought the Assembly would have to change if the SDLP were to participate in the administration. But he did not know whether it would be better to build on the existing Assembly, whose Committees had done some very useful work, or to scrap it and start afresh. He would welcome a further meeting with the Bishops when his thinking was clearer.

10. Dr McMullan said there was great concern in his diocese about the plan to move the RUC training depot from Enniskillen. The plan was perceived as a rolling back of the border, creating a form of "no man's land" in Fermanagh. The Secretary of State replied that, though the training centre was being moved for sound practical reasons, the RUC's operational presence in Enniskillen would not be diminished. Dr McMullan indicated

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that he was not convinced.

*Rrc*

R P CLEASBY  
Private Secretary

29 November 1984

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