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From the Private Secretary

7 May 1992

cc PS / All Ministers

PS / PUS

PS / Mr Fell

Mr Ledlie

Mr Thomas

Mr Alston

Mr Bell

Mr Sharma

Mr Watkins

Mr Cooke

Mr DTR

Mr Hume

Dear Sir,

MEETING WITH NORTHERN IRELAND CHURCH LEADERS

Thank you for your letter of 5 May containing briefing for the Prime Minister's meeting this afternoon with Northern Ireland church leaders. The Northern Ireland Secretary was present. (as was Mr Chichester)

The Prime Minister said that the meeting was not a one-off occasion. It should be repeated either here or in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland was a central, not a peripheral, problem for the British Government. We wanted to make progress. The patience of the people of Northern Ireland was one of the wonders of the 20th century. But the time had come for progress to be made by all politicians and not just those in Northern Ireland. Sir Patrick Mayhew had made an outstanding start. We would spare no efforts to bring the talks to a successful conclusion.

Archbishop Eames welcomed the start in the Province made by Sir Patrick Mayhew. The role of the churches was important historically and they remained influential. There had never been a time in Northern Ireland when more people in both communities had been so revolted by violence. Now was the time to take risks for peace. It was nonetheless true that people in Northern Ireland had not fully explored the meaning of the word compromise. They were peace-lovers but not necessarily yet peace-makers. The Election had given a strong vote in favour of dialogue and a message to the paramilitaries to get off the backs of ordinary people.

Cardinal Daly also took comfort from the Election result, particularly in West Belfast, the heartland of Sinn Fein. There had been a vote for constitutional politics. We must exploit that opportunity. Good security was essential but the battle for hearts and minds had to be an integral part of it. Security operations should be handled sensitively. We should build on excellent initiatives such as "making Belfast work" through economic development in urban and rural areas. Unemployment and deprivation caused anger and resentment which were fuel for Provisional Sinn Fein who argued that nothing had worked or would work except violence. He knew the difficulties during a recession. He was grateful for the money that had been spent in Northern Ireland. It should be continued and even increased. He paid tribute to the work of Richard Needham. In many respects the situation had been transformed, eg in Derry. The high economic profile had had a beneficial spin-off on politics. There was better cross-community co-operation. There was good cross-border

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co-operation.

Dr Sterritt said that the Presbyterian Church was, to some extent, the voice of the silent majority. Presbyterians on the whole did not take to the streets. They felt their voice was not always heard. He was delighted at the higher profile being given to Northern Ireland. An end to violence was essential. He also acknowledged the importance of economic factors. The present talks must be allowed to continue to a positive solution. Time must be allowed even if the Anglo-Irish dimension had to be deferred. Cardinal Daly nodded his agreement.

Mr Good (President of the Methodist Church) said that deprivation was not the cause of Northern Ireland's problems but had been manipulated by the terrorists to their own ends. Economic development could be divisive if it was seen to go to one area and not another. This required great sensitivity. He endorsed Dr Sterritt's point that we should not allow time for the talks to be seen to have run out and for this to be used by some Ulster politicians as a pretext. The church leaders hoped to visit Mr Reynolds and make the same point to him. The Queen's speech had spoken of a positive relationship with the Republic of Ireland. He endorsed that but some politicians in Northern Ireland might wonder what the significance of those words was.

[Mr Well may not be aware that the Cardinal is very propitious with his words.]

The Prime Minister said that, if you put the opposite proposition, it obviously made no sense to have a negative relationship with the Republic. We had differences with the Republic but we worked amicably in the EC and talked to each other often. It was now possible to look at problems without some of the past suspicions. He had a dialogue with Mr Reynolds. It was right to give expression to that changed atmosphere and that had been the thinking behind The Queen's speech.

The Prime Minister said that Archbishop Eames had talked about taking risks for peace and Cardinal Daly had spoken about a battle for hearts and minds. In Northern Ireland, perception was almost as important as deeds. What more could be done to increase popular support for a political settlement? The church leaders had already played a big part in helping to create a better mood. Compromise was not a dirty word in the Prime Minister's dictionary. It did not involve the sacrifice of integrity.

Archbishop Eames spoke of the issue of self-realisation. Perception could become reality overnight in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland needed to show that, as a community, they could be trusted. The traditional obstacles to progress would come up in the talks but most Catholics and Protestants were ready to argue for compromise and to accept an agreement that did not have everything in it that they wanted. This represented an immense change compared with, eg, Sunningdale. Should the talks get bogged down, he thought there would be support for the Prime Minister putting forward his own ideas as a basis for a settlement. The settlement could not be imposed but more people than ever before would be willing to see the two governments put down a blueprint. There was less risk than in the past of strikes and lock-outs. Mr Good agreed. Any blueprint should be

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agreed privately with the Government of the Republic but put forward as the sole proposition of HMG. Archbishop Eames agreed. He added that internment was no part of any solution he envisaged.

Cardinal Daly said:

- (i) In some areas people believed there had been a breakdown of ordinary policing against ordinary crime. For understandable reasons, the police were slow to respond to cries of help but those cries and the need were genuine.
- (ii) ✓ The policing of terrorists' funerals was a potential flashpoint. Quite often local police commanders advised a lower profile. The clergy could usually give a reliable guarantee that there would not be a military display. The more intense the police presence, the greater the risk of sympathy for the terrorists. The IRA were adept at using the security forces as part of their propaganda. The security forces should not allow themselves to be manoeuvred by the provisionals into that situation.
- (iii) ✓ There was dissatisfaction with the police complaints procedure. It was slow, often led to no action and people who lodged complaints got what was obviously a standard, mass-produced reply.

Dr Sterritt said that people knew who the terrorists were and wanted to know that everything possible within the law had been done to apprehend them. The IRA were the main problem. We needed a security policy which was seen to work. The Prime Minister commented that there was a narrow line between a security policy which protected the public and one that was so intrusive that it became a propaganda weapon. The security forces were doing everything they could and the extra resources made available to them had improved the situation. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that security policy meant doing everything possible within the law. That meant living with the rules of evidence. He had been determined as Attorney General to avoid a situation in which people could say that there was one law for the security forces and another for everybody else. But within the law very heavy blows could be, and had been, dealt at the terrorists.

Dr Sterritt said that he and other church leaders were constantly encouraging people to provide information on terrorist acts. Sir Patrick Mayhew endorsed the value of this. Whenever there was a terrorist incident, there were always people who had knowledge but who kept quiet.

✓ Archbishop Eames questioned the value of permanent vehicle checkpoints. This view was endorsed by the others, particularly Mr Good. Killeen was a very good case in point. Anybody who wanted to could cross the border on alternative roads. Meanwhile the checkpoint was an obvious target for attack.

Mr Good said all four church leaders had recently visited Maghaberry Prison. There was a lot of distress among the prisoners about visiting conditions, including lack of privacy. Despite the otherwise excellent facilities, some prisoners said that they would prefer to be at the Maze because of the easier visiting arrangements and better relationship with staff. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that Mr Mates would be visiting the prison and would look at this aspect.

Archbishop Eames said that when issues affecting, eg Northern Ireland education, went through the House of Commons by Order in Council late at night, there was the perception that Northern Ireland was being treated as a banana Republic. Sir Patrick Mayhew said that this emphasised the need for progress in the political talks. We should harness Northern Ireland's political talent to the business of governing Northern Ireland. Nobody could gainsay the case for restoring a substantial measure of self-government to Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister said that the timetable set for the talks would help concentrate minds. We should not let things drift. We would not come forward with anything that was unworkable but if a conclusion was reached, he hoped the churches would be able to support it. We needed to think through what the attack on the outcome would be from the bigots and take steps to pre-empt that attack. The time might come when acceptance of the proposals would depend upon whether Northern Ireland citizens trusted the Government and the churches or whether they listened to destructive voices on both sides. People must trust us, hence the high profile which he and the Secretary of State were taking. A settlement would need the help and encouragement of the churches. Archbishop Eames said the Government would have it. Cardinal Daly said that the bigots had less and less of an audience, but that positive mood needed to be encouraged. Dr Sterritt said that if the majority population of Ulster thought that a settlement was being imposed from Dublin, then there was nothing the churches could do to control the reaction.

Archbishop Eames said that insecurity in the minds of Protestants exercised a corrosive power. Anything which was seen to have a Dublin slant could give credibility to the bigots. There was an indefinable fear of the Republic and all it stood for. People looked across the border and did not see a pluralist society in the Republic. He thought that a number of Catholics were more interested in justice in Northern Ireland than immediate unification. Cardinal Daly agreed - so long as there was an institutionalised Anglo-Irish dimension. [cf note on page 2]

The Prime Minister said that the next few months would be crucial. He hoped to come to Northern Ireland and hoped that he and the church leaders could have a meeting there. For security reasons, it might necessarily be at short notice. The church leaders agreed. Mr. Good said that in recent times the spotlight had turned on the churches. When, before the Election, the talks failed, people had turned to the churches for a lead and the church leaders had even considered how they might be able to

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Cardinal Daly said there had not been time to raise a number of educational issues but he would hope to take them up with the Secretary of State. This was agreed.

The church leaders showed the Prime Minister the press statement they had drafted. The Prime Minister agreed it. Both sides would say that this was a first meeting. There would be more.

I am copying this letter to Richard Gozney (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Simon Webb (Ministry of Defence), and Sonia Phippard (Cabinet Office).

*James,
Stephen*

J. S. WALL

William Pittall, Esq.
Northern Ireland Office

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