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From the Private Secretary

19 June 1996

Dee Martin

CONVERSATION WITH THE TAOISEACH

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach spoke on the telephone today for just under 15 minutes. In the event, they spent relatively little time on Northern Ireland. I am recording separately their discussion on European issues.

After warm congratulations from Bruton on England's football success, he underlined how appalled the Irish Government had been at the Manchester bomb. There was a level of revulsion in Ireland about the IRA greater than had been the case for a long time. Many peoples' eyes had been opened, however belatedly. This was of course due as much to the Adare murder as to the Manchester bomb.

Bruton continued that we would have seen from the Irish Government's statement that they were not proposing to cut off links entirely with Sinn Fein. However, they were not in practice talking to them for the present. They were not accepting any phone calls from Sinn Fein, for example. They would be prepared to talk to them at some point, but only to elicit answers to the questions that had been put to them. The government had decided that if they did cut off all links with Sinn Fein, this would then become an issue in itself and take the pressure off Sinn Fein to answer the important questions.

The Prime Minister said that we had been grateful for the statements made by the Taoiseach over the weekend and since. He had no difficulty with the attitude of the Irish Government to Sinn Fein.

The Taoiseach said that he hoped the Americans were on the same line. It was important that they should not be more consoling to Adams. The Prime Minister said that this was not our impression, at least from contacts with Tony Lake.

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The Taoiseach said that he hoped the Belfast talks could be kept on the rails. He understood that there had been a problem that morning about Unionists wanting to re-open the ground rules paper. The Irish accepted the need to make some concessions to Trimble after the stand he had taken, but this could not be taken too far. The Prime Minister agreed that the talks should be maintained. He thought there was bound to be some posturing and muscle-flexing from the Unionists. The sooner we could get beyond this the better.

The Prime Minister said that he also wanted to raise security. We did not see what more we could do for the moment, but we wanted to be sure that all the angles were covered on Anglo-Irish cooperation. He therefore suggested that Sir John Chilcott and Tim Dalton should meet soon to review intensively current cooperation. This could be done privately. But he would have no objection to public reference to this taking place, as long as it was in low key.

The Taoiseach agreed that such a review was desirable. He thought it should be undertaken as soon as possible. As far as publicity was concerned, he suggested that this should be looked at again once a meeting had taken place. The Prime Minister agreed that this was a sensible way to proceed.

Comment

It was clear that Bruton was not keen to dwell on Northern Ireland during the conversation. The Prime Minister had to wrench the conversation away from Europe in order to make the security point. The Taoiseach may have feared some more radical proposal on our side, and seemed entirely happy to accept what the Prime Minister suggested. I would be grateful if this could now be taken forward urgently.

I am copying this letter to Ken Sutton (Home Office), William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely

John Holmes

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