



Foreign &
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Office

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Dear Mr Lausti,

Thank you for your letter of 24 February to Kate Vineall and Camilla Fenning, my job-share deputies. Camilla Fenning hopes to attend the meeting on Friday. I thought, however, that it might be worth my making some comments in advance.

Since your discussion is to deal to a large extent with the overall UK/Irish relationship, I am rather disappointed that there was no contact with the FCO in preparation of the paper which seems intended to inform that discussion. In particular, I regret the comments about the visit to Britain by President Robinson in 1996 and do not recognise the "enormous paradox" which Mr Partridge describes.

Mr Partridge says in his paper that the tolerance and maturity shown by the peoples of these islands is not matched in the relations between the Irish and British states "who recently could hardly agree on what title the President of the Republic should have while visiting Britain". He then describes this as an example of political disharmony. This is a very misleading portrayal of President Robinson's highly successful visit and the context in which it took place.

President Robinson's acceptance of the Prime Minister's invitation to visit this country as a Guest of the British Government led to the first such visit by an Irish Head of State. That in itself is surely a step forward which is to be welcomed. It compelled both sides, of course, to find ways of dealing with some of the sensitive elements in our relationship.

While the Irish Constitution contains a claim over the territory of Northern Ireland, it is inevitable that there will be difficulties about nomenclature. But we reached an amicable agreement with the Irish about this question which, for example, meant that the Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party was happy to accept an invitation to a lunch at 10 Downing Street in honour of the President. To achieve that outcome is surely evidence of a healthy relationship, and of



But part of the significance of President Robinson's visit also lies in the fact that it was symptomatic of a new quality in the UK/Irish relationship. The President herself mentioned on several occasions her pleasure at the warmth with which she was received in Britain. Her visit covered a wide sweep of events, including luncheons hosted by HM The Queen and the Prime Minister, tea and a Prince's Trust event with HRH The Prince of Wales, a dinner at the Guildhall, a wreath-laying ceremony at Westminster Cathedral in memory of Irish casualties in war, and a Service of Reconciliation at York. The warmth of her reception echoed the welcome which The Prince of Wales enjoyed in Dublin on his official visit in 1995.

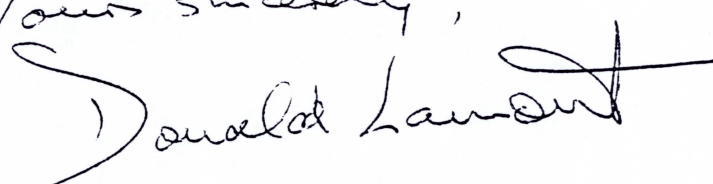
The Prime Minister and Taoiseach have sought to capitalise on this climate of goodwill and to give impetus to the East/West relationship. When they met in Dublin in December 1995, they agreed on a programme of bilateral cooperation to boost the relationship at all levels. This has been followed up in a series of Ministerial and other exchanges which have made an important contribution to the development of relationships within these islands and have succeeded in breaking down a number of the barriers which used to exist between us. To name but a few examples: in 1996, six British Cabinet Ministers visited Dublin (not including visits relating to the Irish Presidency); there has been significant work in the fields of security cooperation and drugs cooperation; the Minister of Armed Forces paid an unprecedented visit to Dublin, and welcomed Mr Barratt to London recently in return; the Irish-Scottish Academic Initiative was launched in Dublin; and discussions are underway for increased youth sector cooperation.

To touch on another area of the relationship which does not receive its due in the paper, I think it worth noting that an office of the British Council has been flourishing in Dublin for just over 6 years. And while I believe that both sides would argue that the level of economic, social and cultural cooperation renders the earlier proposal for an Advisory Committee somewhat outdated, there is a Working Group on Education and Culture, which I co-chair with a colleague from the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs. This, we would maintain, makes some modest contribution to stimulating the development of relationships in the areas it deals with.

The British/Irish relationship is complex. It is full of sensitivities. Although history gives us much that we hold in common, it is unsurprising that on a number of questions the interests of the two States are different. The initiative taken by the Heads of Government is an acknowledgement that much more needs to be done to develop what is positive in the relationship. Without being complacent, I would argue, however, that the relationship is more healthy and vigorous than the background paper allows, and that a proper understanding of that vitality is needed if we are to judge the value of any new institutions.



I am sorry that I cannot take part in your meeting. I look forward to hearing an account from Mrs Fenning and would be happy to discuss the UK/Irish relationship with you or any of the participants in your meeting on another occasion.

Yours sincerely,


Donald A Lamont
Republic of Ireland Department

cc: Mr P McDonagh, Irish Embassy - fax