

CONFIDENTIAL



10 DOWNING STREET  
LONDON SW1A 2AA

FAXED

0900 12/7 (also FCO)

SUBJECT  
MASTER

Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

11 July 1996

*Dear Martin,*

### TELEPHONE CALL WITH THE TAOISEACH, 11 JULY

The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach spoke on the telephone late this evening for some 20 minutes. The call was at the Taoiseach's request.

The Taoiseach said that he had been watching the results of the decision on the march on television. The decision had demonstrated that force won the day. This went against all that he and the Prime Minister had been working for. He was particularly concerned that the negotiations with the Churchmen had still been going on when the decision to send the march through had been taken.

The Prime Minister said that was not the advice he had been given. The Churchmen and others had indeed been working hard to produce an agreement for the last two days. But they had not succeeded. One of the major problems had been that those on the Orange side would not talk to the leader of the Garvaghy Road Residents' Association because he was a convicted terrorist. The Taoiseach said that the individual concerned had served his sentence. There were many people around who had served such sentences, including one member of his own Government. This was not a conclusive argument.

The Prime Minister repeated that we had been trying to get an agreement. But the Chief Constable had decided that this was not going to happen, and that, if the march was not allowed through, there was a risk of major loss of life. The RUC and Army could have been overwhelmed by 50,000 marchers. The Garvaghy Estate would then have been at risk, including the lives of its residents.

Bruton said that this kind of argument had been used before when the Government had caved into the 1974 Workers' Strike. Why had the decision been taken to block the road in the first place, if it was going to be reversed

CONFIDENTIAL



## CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

later? The impression was given that one decision had been taken, and then when force was applied, it had been reversed. What had happened over the previous few days was entirely predictable, given the experience of previous years, and should have been anticipated. The original decision should have been stuck to.

The Prime Minister said that the developments this year had not been predictable. Last year, an accommodation had been found to allow a small number of marchers through. We had wanted a similar agreement this year, but the local residents had not been prepared to agree. We had then been faced with an unprecedented situation, and the prospect of an overwhelming force of marchers.

Bruton said that he found it difficult to believe that the Army could not have coped with this situation. The reversal of the decision did not convey an impression that the Government was in charge of events. The Prime Minister said that he resented this remark and was not prepared to continue the conversation if that was the Taoiseach's attitude. British Governments had the habit of taking the advice of the Chief Constable, and there had been no reason not to do so in this case. If the Government had not done so, and there had been widespread loss of life, the Government would have been blamed by many, including the Irish Government.

Bruton said that the RUC were being put in an impossible position. These were political decisions with political consequences. The position they found themselves in made it very difficult for the RUC to win the respect of the Nationalist community.

The Prime Minister asked what the Taoiseach would have done himself faced with this situation. Would he have instructed the Garda to act in a way contrary to their professional advice, and the advice of the Army? Bruton repeated that the decision had been taken while the Churchmen were still trying to reach an agreement, even if they had not had success at that point. This had done untold damage to the feelings of the Nationalist community and to many in the Irish Republic. He was not in the habit of exaggerating these things. Feelings were running very high indeed.

The Prime Minister commented that there were very strong feelings in Northern Ireland too. The task was to damp them down, not puff them up. Bruton argued again that putting the RUC in an impossible position between the communities made it very difficult to get them accepted by both sides. Relations between the RUC and the Nationalist community had been put back.

The Prime Minister said that the RUC had to have operational independence. If they were under the direct political control of the British

CONFIDENTIAL



## CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

Government, it was not difficult to imagine how the Nationalist community would have reacted to them over the years. Bruton repeated that the decision to let the march through had been a political decision, with political consequences. However, it was important to look to the future. He hoped the Prime Minister would consider the immediate establishment of an independent commission to look at this problem urgently. It would need a wider remit than just policing matters. It was important to avoid a repeat of what had happened in future years. The residents of Catholic areas were now feeling very insecure in their own homes. He asked what decision had been taken about the march on the Ormeau Road.

The Prime Minister said that no decision had yet been taken. On the longer term, he agreed that there was a need to find a way to prevent these situations arising. Some independent involvement in this would be desirable. He hoped to say something about this in a few days, but he did not want to rush into this before having looked at all the implications of recent events.

In response to Bruton's question, the Prime Minister said that he did not expect triumphalism from the Unionists. They had not got exactly what they wanted, since the march had been low key. In any case, everyone was shaken by what had happened. He did not want to defend the behaviour of many in the Protestant community. It had been appalling. But the position was not one sided. There was no doubt that Sinn Fein and the IRA had been influencing the Garvaghy Road residents. They must be rubbing their hands at what had happened.

Bruton said that he entirely agreed with the last point. The march was a victory for all the things that the Prime Minister and he had stood against. He accepted that these problems could not be solved in a telephone conversation, but he did want to convey to the Prime Minister the sense that had been created in the minds of the Nationalists, that if enough people could be assembled and enough pressure exerted, force could get its own way. The two governments should do everything possible to reverse that sense. The British Government had a particular responsibility here because of its operational responsibility on the ground. It would be very dangerous if people concluded that force worked.

The Prime Minister commented that he had not heard complaints from the Irish side when Nationalist force had effectively blocked the march from taking place. The Taoiseach accepted the point but said that he had not wanted to stir things up by making a statement at that stage. The Prime Minister repeated that the Chief Constable's concern throughout had been to avoid bloodshed and widespread damage. It looked as if he might have achieved that, although the situation was difficult.

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 4 -

Bruton said that he hoped he and the Prime Minister could talk again after the weekend. The situation could evolve nastily meanwhile, but he hoped not. The Prime Minister agreed that it would be helpful to speak again. He too hoped that the temperature would have cooled down by then, although there could be no guarantee of this.

Comment

This was a bad tempered conversation on both sides, but the tone improved towards the end when discussion turned to the future rather than the merits of the Chief Constable's decisions. I agreed afterwards with Paddy Teahon that we would take the line with the Press that the two men had exchanged views about the developments of the day. They had agreed that the need now was for restraint, and that a way should be found to prevent such situations recurring in the future. The two men had also agreed to stay closely in touch. Teahon said that they would add on their side that the Taoiseach had conveyed to the Prime Minister the anger and concern in the Nationalist community about what had happened. I said that, on our side, we would make clear the Prime Minister's view that the Chief Constable had taken his decisions entirely for operational reasons, with a view to avoiding the serious risk of loss of life.

I am copying this to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and to Veronica Sutherland in Dublin (by fax).

  
JOHN HOLMES

Martin Howard Esq  
Northern Ireland Office

CONFIDENTIAL