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SUBJECT  
MASTER

be EO  
J Haslam

10 DOWNING STREET  
LONDON SW1A 2AA

Filed on:

From the Private Secretary

24 June 1996

Dear Mark,

### EUROPEAN COUNCIL: BILATERAL WITH TAOISEACH (MARK II)

The Prime Minister had a second much longer bilateral with the Taoiseach in the margins of the Florence European Council on 22 June, at the Taoiseach's request. Frank Murray was there on the Irish side. Three areas were covered.

#### Irish EU Presidency

Bruton asked the Prime Minister's advice about the best format for the planned Special European Council in October. He was inclined to make it just Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers, with two supporting officials; to hold sessions with Prime Ministers only; and to insist on no communiqué. The Prime Minister supported this approach in general, particularly the last point. If there was no need to negotiate a communiqué, the event need last no more than one full day. But there might be a need for the presence of Finance Ministers, depending on the agenda.

Bruton said he did not particularly want to discuss the detail of the IGC, but to reflect on the overall vision for the IGC. On dates, he was looking at the weekend of 4/5 October. The Prime Minister said that would be difficult for him, because of the party conference the following week.

#### Northern Ireland

Bruton said that his impression was that the Belfast talks were moving forward, however slowly. Meanwhile Sinn Féin's intentions were unclear. They appeared to be trying to get the Irish back in contact with them through hints of a different attitude, but Bruton thought this was essentially a ruse. The Prime Minister said that if they declared a new ceasefire now, no-one would

CONFIDENTIAL



CONFIDENTIAL

- 2 -

have them in the talks in the short-term. Bruton agreed. But he thought this might, perversely, be attractive to them, because it would cause maximum disruption to the current process. The Prime Minister said that they might well try, by this method, to split the Unionists from the British Government, and the British Government from the Irish Government.

Bruton went on that the conditions for Sinn Fein's entry into talks had not changed formally but he was aware that British backbenchers would oppose their rapid entry very firmly. He would meanwhile have equal and opposite trouble from opposition backbenchers in the Dail. Meanwhile Sinn Fein's air of injured innocence was absurd.

The Prime Minister commented that Sinn Fein had been rumbled by most international opinion. He wanted to mention incidentally that he had seen references to the possibility of a broadcasting ban on Sinn Fein by the Irish Cabinet. He would strongly advise against this. Lifting the ban in Britain had been one of the best things he had done. Sinn Fein had been forced to defend their own often untenable positions. This was valuable.

Bruton said that a broadcasting ban had not in fact been seriously considered. But they had wanted to put a number of tough responses in public circulation to keep up the pressure on Sinn Fein. He had never wanted to sever links with Sinn Fein altogether, because cutting off contact altogether would not do any good. But there were no contacts for the moment. Irish public opinion was currently disgusted following the murder of Garda officer McCabe. It was perhaps selfish to be so influenced by one murder in Ireland, but that was the fact of it. It was also the case that bombs on the mainland were felt in Ireland more than bombs in Northern Ireland, perhaps because more Irish people lived in, and visited, the mainland.

The Prime Minister asked whether Bruton expected more bombs. Bruton said that on balance he did not. He thought Sinn Fein would go for a new ceasefire for the disruptive tactical reasons he had already outlined. But Irish intelligence suggested strongly that the basis of republican thinking on the need for the use of force had not changed. Their aim was to fight to get the British out of Ireland, as a recent recruiting had put it.

The Prime Minister joked that perhaps Ireland could join the Commonwealth. Bruton took this seriously. Leaving the Commonwealth had been a mistake by his party in 1948, which had cost them a lot of Church of Ireland votes. He thought rejoining the Commonwealth was a card to be played as part of a settlement, perhaps if proposed changes to Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution were not enough to satisfy the Unionists. This diverted conversation briefly on to the Royal Family and the possibility of a visit by The

CONFIDENTIAL



## CONFIDENTIAL

- 3 -

Queen to Ireland. The idea that the existence of a claim on British territory by the Irish Republic might constitute an obstacle to such a visit seemed to strike Bruton as a new thought.

The Prime Minister wondered what a final settlement on Northern Ireland would look like, besides the dry notions set out in the Joint Framework Document. Where would the final give and take be? Bruton said that the Joint Framework Document was important. But in his personal view the key would be to get away from the obsession with the status of Northern Ireland, the Constitutional position in the Irish Republic, and the possible details of North-South bodies. The focus should instead be on finding a way to recognise different allegiances and to cater for the psychological aspect of the "Irishness" of the Catholic population. They needed some symbolic affirmation of this in their daily lives.

Spring joined the discussion at this stage, expressing depression about the progress of the Belfast talks. Discussion again turned to the future status of Northern Ireland. Spring said clearly "We don't want it". Bruton made clear the Irish were well aware of the likely cost of Northern Ireland if unity ever came about. He repeated that the crucial point was in any case not the allegiance of territory but psychological allegiance. He liked the idea of setting out in some (non-JFD) way the key elements of a settlement, and would commission some private work on this.

### East-West relations

Bruton said he was keen to find some joint projects. He wondered about transport infrastructure (eg upgrading Holyhead and Pembroke) and efforts to fight jointly drugs and crime (not terrorism, which spoke for itself). These would be obviously popular areas. The Prime Minister said that we had asked for ideas from Ambassadors. He had personally been struck by the extent of bilateral trade. There ought to be possibilities in this area. He was wary about transport infrastructure, since it would immediately conjure up ideas of extra public spending. But he was not against such ideas being considered.

### Press handling

It was agreed that the press should be told of the three areas discussed in outline. This was subsequently done.

### Comment

This was an interesting, free-ranging conversation over a beer, not all of which I have recorded in detail. As far as the future shape of a settlement is concerned, I am not sure what sort of work the Taoiseach will commission, or

CONFIDENTIAL



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- 4 -

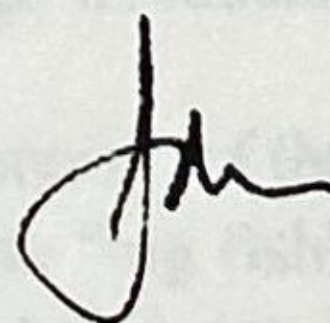
what thinking might exist or could be done on our side on the key elements. I would be grateful for your thoughts, and am aware of the sensitivity of any such exercise.

On the EU side, this is not the first time the Taoiseach has seemed keen for advice on the Presidency. We might be able to turn this to our advantage, particularly if his instinct of turning to us for help is at all shared lower down (not by Spring himself, I assume).

On joint projects, I have no idea whether Bruton's ideas have merit. Perhaps Veronica Sutherland could comment and say when any ideas of our own might come forward.

I am copying this to William Ehrman (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Sir Stephen Wall (UKREP Brussels) and Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).

*Yours sincerely*



**JOHN HOLMES**

Martin Howard Esq  
Northern Ireland Office

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