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Foreign &
Commonwealth
Office

17 April 1997

London SW1A 2AH

Dear John,

Proposed Visit to Britain by the Taoiseach: May 1997

The Irish, through their Embassy here, have put in a request for a meeting between the Taoiseach and the Prime Minister on 8 May. Mr Bruton is planning to take up a long-standing invitation to address the Oxford Union on 7 May, attend a breakfast meeting of the Irish in Business Network on 8 May and a reception at the Irish Club that afternoon, returning to Dublin that evening or on 9 May. He will not on present plans be accompanied by Mr Spring.

We had anticipated Irish interest in an early post-election bilateral, whether billed as a summit or not. But, while there are strong arguments for a meeting taking place before or shortly after the resumption of the talks on 3 June, such an early meeting could make it very difficult for the British side, if there is a change of government, to engage substantively on Northern Ireland. Our Ambassador has explained this to both Wally Kirwan in the Taoiseach's Department, and Sean O'hUiginn of the Anglo-Irish Division. While they understood the problem, they emphasised the importance attached in Dublin to such a meeting taking place. According to Irish officials, Mr Blair has already agreed to see the Taoiseach during this visit were he to be Prime Minister; it has also been cleared with Dr Mowlem's office.

We believe that the reasons for Irish impatience are probably two-fold. First, the Taoiseach will want to seize the earliest opportunity to register Irish concerns on progress in the talks (including Sinn Fein entry in the event of a ceasefire) and the potentially disastrous impact of further trouble in this summer's marches. Mr Bruton also has his own electoral timetable to consider; 23 May is now the front-runner in media speculation about the date for an Irish general election. If that is the case, it will be important domestically for him to engage with his newly-elected British counterpart before the talks resume, and particularly before 12 July. An Irish election on 23 May would make a significantly later date virtually impossible for the Irish, and there might not be another opportunity until late June, given the likely need for coalition discussions.

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A meeting with the Taoiseach during the first few days of a new Government could however run the risk of a political backlash in Northern Ireland. Unionists might see it as sharp practice by the Irish, with the British Government allowing the Irish Government to get in before local politicians. Set against this is the near certainty that rejecting the request would be deemed a snub to the Taoiseach from the newly-elected Prime Minister. It would be pounced on by the Irish media as a signal that the new Government, of whatever party, was not fully committed to resolving the problem of Northern Ireland. It could therefore put the British Government on the back foot from the start, especially if, as seems increasingly possible, Bruton remains as Taoiseach after the Irish election.

You will form your own view of whether an early meeting could be accommodated in the Prime Minister's diary so soon after an election. (I note that 8 May is Cabinet and PMQs). For our part, we and the Northern Ireland Office believe that on balance we should try to meet the Irish request but at a slightly later date.

The Ambassador believes strongly that our initial response must be positive in tone, welcoming the idea of an early meeting in view of the Taoiseach's fortuitous visit. Without ruling out 8 May, we could indicate that, if there were to be such an early meeting it inevitably would not lead to substantive conclusions. A later date, even if only a matter of days, would ensure that a new Northern Ireland Secretary would have had a chance to meet politicians in Northern Ireland before a meeting with the Irish. Any early meeting, particularly if on 8 May, would need to be low-key and billed as a preliminary, courtesy call during Mr Bruton's presence here on other business. It could also only be provisional until after the election.

The Irish media tend to present any meeting between Prime Ministers as a summit, and the format should down-play this impression. The Irish have mentioned either a call or a working lunch without a press conference. A short courtesy call or tea might be the best option, with no press conference and only one or two advisers on either side (at present the Irish envisage Private Secretary, press spokesman, two officials from the Taoiseach's Department and one from the DFA). Attendance by the Northern Ireland Secretary would also need to be considered. We should warn the Irish against using the meeting to spring an unwelcome initiative, for example the presentation of their collection of Bloody Sunday documents (though this does not appear to be the intention).

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We could revert to the Irish either in Dublin or through the Embassy here, if you wished it to. But I imagine it makes better sense for you to discuss this directly with Teahon.

I am copying this minute to the Private Secretaries of other members of NI and Jan Polley at the Cabinet Office.

yours etc,

Dominick

(Dominick Chilcott)
Private Secretary

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