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FROM: Mrs V E Sutherland
HM Ambassador, Dublin

DATE: 2 May 1997

CC: PS/SofS/FCO - by fax (via RID)
PS/Ministers, NIO
PS/PUS, NIO
PS/Sir David Fell
Mr Thomas
Mr Steele
Mr Stephens
Mr Leach
Mr Bell
Mr Hill
Mr Brooker
Ms Bharucha
Mr Maccabe
Mr Lamont, RID - by fax
Mr A Carey, Washington - by fax
Mr J Holmes, PS/No.10 - by fax
Mr C Budd, Cabinet Office - by fax

PS/SofS

WORKING WITH THE IRISH ON THE NORTHERN IRELAND

INTRODUCTION

1. This minute offers suggestions from Dublin about improving the relationship with the Irish in handling Northern Ireland issues.

2. Working with the Irish has never been easy. Close bilateral cooperation is, however, critical to the achievement of a peaceful settlement in Northern Ireland. Since the Anglo/Irish Agreement was signed in 1985, a more constructive relationship has developed, leading to a number of successful joint initiatives on the North. Room for improvement nevertheless remains.

BACKGROUND: DIFFERENCES IN PERCEPTION AND ATTITUDE

3. The United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland have much in common - history, language, close family ties and, for both countries, their only land border. Yet these factors have too often served to divide, rather than unite. Only recently has the bilateral relationship begun to approach anything like normality. Even now, mistrust and misapprehension are still the defining characteristics on the Irish side, while to them the British approach frequently smacks of arrogance and insensitivity. Why?

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FRI 02 MAY 97 11:44

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4. From a Dublin perspective, the main reasons include:

- The Irish sense of "victimhood". For many Irish people, history is a record of things being done to them, rather than by them, which has fuelled a deep-seated, albeit diminishing, sense of grievance against the British.
- The Irish fear of marginalisation. The Irish believe, with some justification, that the island's problems have been deepened by the failure of successive British Governments to take them seriously enough. As John Hume has put it, the reason the Irish never forget is because the British never remember.
- The differences in underlying objectives. Both Governments are committed to progress on the basis of the Framework Documents. The Irish are now committed to the principle of consent. But the aspiration to a United Ireland has not disappeared, even though for most Irish people it is a distant, and increasingly dim, prospect.
- Different constituencies reflecting these different objectives. The Taoiseach, John Bruton, well understands Unionist sensitivities, but he also knows that the sympathies of his countrymen are largely nationalist, with only occasional acknowledgement of Unionist/Loyalist opinion. However the British Government has to reconcile a much wider range of conflicting interests, including Unionist and nationalist aspirations, and the sometimes conflicting demands of security and civil rights. The complexity of these responsibilities is not always fully understood in the Republic.
- The influence of key nationalist advisers. No Irish politician, not even a Taoiseach as well disposed to the UK as John Bruton, can afford to ignore the advice of key officials with long experience of Northern Ireland issues, such as Martin Mansergh, Special Adviser to Fianna Fail, and Sean O'hUiginn of the Department of Foreign Affairs (shortly to be replaced by Dermot Gallagher, currently Irish Ambassador in Washington). Their power derives from their perceived role as guardians of the nationalist tradition.

02/05/97

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FRI 02 MAY 97 11:45

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LESSONS FROM THE PAST

5. These underlying factors do much to explain the mutual incomprehension which regularly arises between the two Governments. If the management of bilateral relations on Northern Ireland is to improve, then it is important to take account of these fundamental Irish concerns in British policy making.

6. An approach incorporating the following could bring significant benefit without compromising any British position of principle:

- the development of closer personal relations between Ministers;
- a more effective presentation of British policy;
- a more considered approach to policy consultations with the Irish;

A WAY FORWARD

(i) Personal Relationships

7. Stereotypes often mislead, but it remains true that the Irish manner of transacting business relies to a greater degree than the British on personal relationships. The more British Ministers can build up close personal relationships with their Irish counterparts, the easier it will be to reach the personal understandings which can lead to an important breakthrough.

8. In this, informal contacts and invitations of all kinds can play a crucial part. It is impossible to emphasise too strongly just how much the judiciously timed telephone call can improve the atmosphere in which business is transacted. Just as important, such an approach can prevent the public outbursts by the Irish which are an embarrassment to both sides, and thus an impediment to progress. Above all, it will demonstrate that the British Government is taking the Irish seriously.

(ii) A considered approach to policy consultations with the Irish Government

9. Closer personal relationships should make it easier to take account of Irish susceptibilities in policy planning. There will be occasions when British decisions are unacceptable to the Irish, but advance planning will help defuse tension, and overcome the British reputation for too frequently adopting a negative stance. Possibilities include:

- sharing problems with the Irish at an early stage in the policy-making process: consultation with the Irish may appear superficially straightforward, but it is not. Such consultation can lead to acrimony, particularly through Irish press leaks. Nevertheless, the Irish judge that they have a far better appreciation of the merits of close consultation. The more that can be done to counter this perception, the less justification there will be for criticism, public and private;

02/05/97

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FRI 02 MAY 97 11:45

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taking pains over lower priority issues: there are many issues which arouse strong emotions in the Republic, whereas in the UK they appear of secondary importance. Such issues range from historical anniversaries including the Famine, to disasters such as Bloody Sunday, and individual cases including Lee Clegg or Róisín McAliskey. These will inevitably arouse strong emotions in some quarters in the Republic. However, sensitive handling will help to forestall an outburst of anti-British feeling.

using the Embassy more: much bilateral business on Northern Ireland is done through the Anglo/Irish Secretariat in Maryfield. This works well, and for symbolic constitutional reasons, the Irish (and particularly the DFA) value this avenue of consultation above all others. The level and range of consultation through Maryfield should be maintained, but it should be complemented with more targetted use of the Embassy. Maryfield does not, indeed cannot, reflect the totality of Irish Government attitudes and approaches to Northern Ireland issues. Furthermore, any message transmitted to Dublin through this route will pass through an Irish filter. The Embassy have access to a wider range of Irish Ministers and officials, and can offer a direct and targetted presentation of British thinking to them. This channel could be better exploited, and the Embassy could usefully do more on instructions.

(iii) Getting the Message Across

10. The lessons of the past point to the need to present British policies more effectively. In some cases failure in this respect has had results which are little short of disastrous. Many examples could be cited where a clearer advance publicity effort would have paid dividends.

11. Much work is already being done in London to coordinate the information effort. But this task is so important that it should be made the responsibility of a senior individual with a remit to identify and manage the presentation of potentially divisive issues. There is still too much compartmentalisation in London, with officials in home Departments failing to anticipate the likely impact of policies, and their presentation, on attitudes in the Republic. The same is true of Northern Ireland, where continuing efforts are always needed to achieve convincing policy presentation.

12. In this effort regular visits to the Republic by NIO Ministers to present the British case will be of particular value. For example, appearances on TV channels in the Republic have far greater impact than similar exposure on the BBC.

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02/05/97

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CONCLUSION

13. The establishment of a framework for bilateral cooperation - the Anglo/Irish Agreement - and then building on it, has done much to improve attitudes in the Republic towards both Northern Ireland and the British Government. It has also led to a significant intensification of bilateral exchanges across a wide range of activity. I shall shortly put forward suggestions designed to stimulate this effort further in a number of practical ways.

14. Meanwhile, although none of the suggestions outlined above is in itself dramatic, taken together they could make a dramatic improvement to interaction with the Irish Government, and Irish people more widely. The purpose of these initiatives is not simply better relations as an end in themselves, desirable though these are: it is to achieve a more harmonious working atmosphere without which real progress in Northern Ireland will be elusive.

(SIGNED)

Veronica Sutherland
Ambassador

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