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From the Private Secretary

10 October 1997

*Dear Gen,*

### MEETING WITH THE IRISH PRIME MINISTER, 10 OCTOBER

The Prime Minister met Ahern for about half an hour in the margins of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. He was accompanied by Paddy Teahon and Joe Lennon. Jonathan Powell, Alastair Campbell and I were there on our side.

After initial discussion about Ray Burke and his successor, Ahern said that the substantive talks had at least started. He congratulated the Prime Minister on his handling of Trimble, which had got him into the talks only a week after Trimble had promised. Mitchell was keeping up the pressure for progress. He only hoped the parties would be able to keep up. The Prime Minister said that it was in some ways little short of miraculous that the talks were under way. There were many problems to come. But the key thing was to narrow down the areas of disagreement. When he had seen Trimble earlier in the week, he had tried to strip things down to where the real problems were. We were trying to steer the UUP away from their fears about Strand II on to Strand III. If we could get movement on Strand III of a kind that would reassure the UUP, that might make Strand II easier.

Ahern said he did not believe there were any fundamental problems in Stand I. He knew that the Framework Document's words about Strand II caused problems. They represented the assessment of the two Governments, but the parties could of course discuss them. At the end of the process, the Irish Government could be very flexible on Strand I, naturally, and Strand III, but they had to have the essence of Strand II, ie a North/South body with executive powers. Without that no settlement could be sold in Ireland and no referendum won. As long as a meaningful North/South body was there, he was ready to give cover for it to the Unionists. He was trying not to make life difficult for the Unionists in the meantime, but hoped that they would engage in the negotiations more seriously than hitherto.

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The Prime Minister said he would carry on working on the Unionists to discover where their real problems were. He agreed that, while there were difficulties on Strand I, and it was always hard for people in Northern Ireland to agree on anything, nevertheless these problems were soluble. On Strand II, he agreed that there had to be a North/South body. That was why reassurance had to be built into Strand III. The Unionists feared an override. He kept telling them this was not the case but there was still a problem. His strategy therefore was to get them to face up to Strand II by helping them in Strand III. The Unionists did accept the principle of a North/South body, when they were pushed on their position. They should be able to accept something reasonable.

Ahern said that innovative ways of dealing with Strand III should be looked at. In Strand II, there were many areas where practical cooperation could build up over the years without threatening anything important from a Unionist point of view. Much had happened already. There were many all-Irish bodies in existence, for example surgeons, trade unions, teachers etc.

The Prime Minister agreed. But it would be helpful if the IGC could discuss issues other than Northern Ireland, for example European issues. Broadening the relationship would be good in any case. He wanted to work much more closely with the Irish on Europe. All this would help the Unionists to see cooperation as natural.

Paddy Teahon said that there was a problem in the sense that the IGC representative on the British side was the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. But this could presumably be overcome. He was much in favour himself of linking the two government systems in a coherent way.

Ahern agreed that there were many issues where the two sides could cooperate. This would help to set the right framework. Teahon cautioned that, if the Irish were to go down this road, they would need some reassurance about Strand II. Otherwise Trimble would pocket what he had been given and not be ready to give anything in return. The Prime Minister suggested that ideas on this should be worked up. Ahern agreed.

Ahern raised the issue of prisoners. He knew that we were concerned about how repatriated prisoners would be treated. He could give an absolute assurance that any prisoner returned to the Republic would be treated exactly the same as they would be treated by the British system. There would be no fast track release. References to "emergency situations" only applied to positions

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where prisoners were near death. It was not a question of rapid release. He hoped this assurance would help. It was difficult to over-estimate how important the prisoners issue was to both Republicans and Loyalists, in terms of building confidence.

Ahern went on to raise another issue, which had been put to him both by Sinn Fein and by the SDLP. They were saying that the British authorities should be more sensitive about dealing with Sinn Fein people. If the impression gained ground that harassment was involved, this would make life harder. There was of course no question of letting up on ordinary police work in search of terrorists, arms caches etc., but sensitivity was needed otherwise. The recent Siobhan O'Hanlon incident had given all this new profile, although he understood that the RUC version of this incident might be rather different.

The Prime Minister said that we would do our best in this area. On the prisoners' front, we had a severe problem over the transfer of Jason Campbell from Scotland. But we would go on doing whatever we could. However, there was clearly a dispute inside the Republican movement. If Sinn Fein went back to violence – and some preliminary things appeared to be starting up – we would be in severe difficulties. Ahern said that he had no sense that this looked likely at the moment. The dialogue between Sinn Fein leadership and the activists was much better than during the last ceasefire. His security people were reasonably relaxed. The political side of the movement still seemed to be winning the arguments.

The Prime Minister asked about the Continuity Army Council. Ahern said he hoped there could be a combined media effort to stop talking up Ruairi O'Braudaigh. He had been a nobody for 11 years now, and did not justify the prominence he was getting. He was not able to recruit seriously at present, but this might change if his position continued to be talked up.

Ahern also raised the extension of the parades legislation to cover "cultural expressions". He believed that this was directed particularly at the Gaelic Athletics Association. There might have been undesirable people in the Association from time to time, but there had been no trouble from the Association itself for 30 years. It should not be put in the same box as Republican or Loyalist marches. If it figured in the legislation at all, no matter what the intentions about actual use were, this would be a very bad sign. The Association's national leaders were very serious people with no political interest – and were meeting the following day. He had so far stopped them going public,

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but if the legislation was extended as he feared, it would be a non-confidence building measure. The Prime Minister said he was not aware of the particular issue of the Association. But he would look into it.

Ahern also raised Bloody Sunday. He understood that the press stories that morning were misleading. But he appreciated the hard work we were putting into this issue. The Prime Minister confirmed that no decisions had yet been taken.

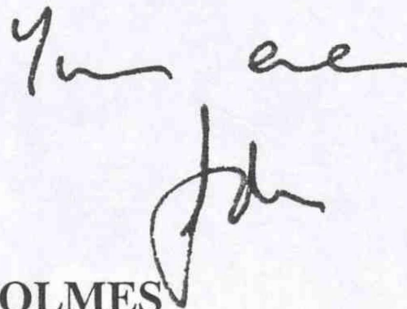
Comment

Before this bilateral, I had had a short session with Paddy Teahon, and briefed him on the meeting with Trimble, where we stood on prisoners, and Bloody Sunday. He had also raised the Siobhan O'Hanlon case with me. Paddy took the same line on Strand II and Strand III as the Taoiseach. The Irish were broad minded about Strand III as long as the essence of Strand II was preserved.

The Prime Minister is keen to follow up the useful expression of Irish interest in a broader version of the IGC proposed in Strand III. It would be useful if I could have a word with the experts during the course of next week on what work has been done in the past in this area. I suspect Paddy Teahon will want to talk to me in some detail before long.

I would also be grateful for background on the Gaelic Athletics Association. Paddy Teahon whispered to me afterwards that this was a particular hobby horse of Ahern's - he was a long-standing member himself.

I am copying this to John Grant (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Ken Sutton (Home Office), Jan Polley (Cabinet Office), Stephen Wright in Washington and Veronica Sutherland in Dublin.



JOHN HOLMES

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