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No see please

PRESS CONFERENCE GIVEN BY THE PRIME MINISTER
ON FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 1981

18/11/81

PRIME MINISTER

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Note
This Press Conference
was attended by
Mr Willis & me
6.11.81

You know that we have had the meeting between the Taoiseach and myself today, accompanied by both Foreign Secretaries, and also by Mr. Prior and by Mr. O'Leary and Nigel Lawson - Mr. O'Leary on energy and industry and Mr. Lawson on energy with us.

We have published a communique, which I believe you have. Attached to that communique is a summary of the studies which were set in train nearly a year ago. The Taoiseach and I were very concerned that, apart from the studies on security, the full studies should be published. I do not want it to be thought that there is anything behind what we have decided other than the wish to establish the warmest and most friendly relations, to try to reduce tensions and to make constructive and practical plans for progress; but I do not want anyone to think that we are keeping back any documents other than those on security, for obvious reasons. The full documents will therefore be published next Wednesday.

I would expect, because we are publishing documents, to make a statement in the House on Tuesday. As you know,

I usually answer questions on Tuesday. We also have an Anglo-Italian summit on Monday, so it will not be possible to make a statement then and I would expect to make a full statement to the House of Commons on Tuesday, and the studies will be published simultaneously in London and in Dublin on Wednesday.

The atmosphere of the meeting: warm and friendly, practical and constructive. I think we could also say workmanlike, because you will see from the communique that it tries to mark steady progress forward and I think, if I might sum it up this way, I think both Jim Prior and I would agree: we really look forward to the time when these meetings are not so remarked upon as they are at present. We want them to be really more in the normal course of our work and it is with that in mind that we are setting up the Anglo-Irish Inter-Governmental Council. A rather big name; what it really means is within that framework there will be frequent meetings between ministers and officials, again to discuss practical problems, to try to reduce tensions, to try to establish the most friendly possible relations between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

I think perhaps you might have had time to read the communique and the summary. Can I ask now for questions?

QUESTION

Prime Minister, may I start by asking you if you could explain more precisely the term on page 4 of the communique where you say - paragraph 10 - the practise of economic cooperation would in itself generate cooperation. Could you be more precise about what you hope it might lead on to in terms of development?

PRIME MINISTER

It seems to me almost a statement to stand on its own. The more we do cooperate together on the several matters - and you will see some of them set out in the summary; there are many matters, a number of energy matters, for example, as you know, we are considering, if the price is right, whether we should purchase gas from Kinsale; we are considering the re-connection of the electric grid between Northern Ireland and the South. There are many aspects of cooperation; you will find some of the subjects set out in para 9 of the summary and it just seems to me sound common sense that if you work together on these practical matters that is the way to go ahead to achieve greater cooperation in all spheres.

PETER SNOW (BBC)

Paragraph 8, Prime Minister: The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach agreed it would be for the parliaments concerned to consider whether there should be an Anglo-Irish body at

parliamentary level. Can you tell us whether it is your personal wish that there should be a body at parliamentary level?

PRIME MINISTER

At the moment there is an Anglo-Irish group of MPs, as you know, and they make contacts with one another from time to time. This is a matter for Parliament to discuss in the first instance, and I think we shall be guided by their wishes. We have to be guided by their wishes, because no such body would succeed unless it were the wish of those members to be a part of it, and we felt the first thing to do was to publish these studies - this is where that suggestion comes from - and see what response it evokes. Obviously, we here are trying to work for the most friendly relations between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. We believe that that is in the interest of both countries and of all our peoples.

QUESTION

Do you foresee at any stage Northern Ireland's constitutional position being debated at this level?

PRIME MINISTER

Northern Ireland's constitutional position is in fact governed, as you know, by the Northern Ireland Constitution Act, 1973, section 1, which says: "It is hereby declared

that Northern Ireland remains part of Her Majesty's dominions and of the United Kingdom and it is hereby affirmed that in no event will Northern Ireland or any part of it cease to be part of Her Majesty's dominions and of the United Kingdom without the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland voting in a poll held for the purposes of this section in accordance with Schedule 1 of this Act." That is the law of the land. It cannot be changed without reference to Parliament and I cannot see Parliament lightly changing that section, and that is why you will find in the communique in paragraph 5: "The Prime Minister affirmed, and the Taoiseach agreed, that any change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would require the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland. The Prime Minister said that if that consent were to be expressed as the result of a poll conducted in accordance with the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973, the British Government would of course accept their decision and would support legislation in the British Parliament to give effect to it." It is all governed by the law of the land at present.

QUESTION

Prime Minister, could I ask you please how the Anglo-Irish Inter-Governmental Council would differ exactly from the present system of regular contact between ministers and officials?

PRIME MINISTER

I think it gives a more formal framework and I think it will lead to more regular contacts, more frequent contacts, between ministers and officials, but it is not going to be a body with an enormous secretariat or anything of that kind. You could say that the first meetings to take place under its aegis were the kind of meeting that we have had today, and we shall hope to have another one in Dublin next spring. The Secretary of State also has frequent contacts with the Republic of Southern Ireland and the Energy Ministers will, but also a lot between officials. So it is not a great big new bureaucratic body; it is a framework under which these contacts between ministers and officials take place.

QUESTION (SAME QUESTIONER)

Is it in fact any different from the continuity of cooperation that you talked about last December. Is there any progress at all in fact?

PRIME MINISTER

I think perhaps it gives it a new impetus. I would describe it that way, but please, may I make it quite clear again and again, we do wish to have the most friendly relations with the Republic of Ireland.

QUESTION

Prime Minister, you said that you wished in future meetings of this kind were not so remarkable - I think those were your words. Are you suggesting then that perhaps the expectations, particularly in Dublin, of the outcome of this meeting were perhaps couched a little too high?

PRIME MINISTER

I do not know what the expectations were in Dublin. I know we have been working on these studies between officials for quite a time, but I think if the meetings were slightly more regular and not so remarked upon, then I think the relationship would go to a normal, friendly relationship. I stress "normal", I stress "friendly", I stress "relationship" and I think that that would be better both for the United Kingdom and for the Republic.

QUESTION

Do you feel that greater cooperation can bring about political settlement?

PRIME MINISTER

A political settlement in Northern Ireland really has to be a matter for the Secretary of State and for the United Kingdom Government in Northern Ireland. I think anything that helps to reduce tension, to reconcile the differences between the two communities in Northern Ireland, is good.

QUESTION

Prime Minister, sorry to come back to you here, would you care to describe your feelings if, for instance, tonight - as he has done earlier today - the Rev. Ian Paisley, among others in the Unionist community - described what has happened today as a sell out and once again accused you of betraying the heritage which he claims you are supposed to be safeguarding?

PRIME MINISTER

But I think he will find it very difficult when we have actually put in the communique Section 1 of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973. At least he will find it difficult if accuracy governs his comments.

QUESTION

Prime Minister, do you dissent from the Taoiseach's belief that the great majority of the people in Ireland would like Ireland to be united?

PRIME MINISTER

I do not comment on what the Taoiseach said is his belief in the actual communique. There are things which the Taoiseach has said and there are things which I have said. What I have to consider in considering the future of Northern Ireland is Section 1 of the Act to which I have referred, and

that gives a guarantee to the people of Northern Ireland that there will be no change in their constitutional status except with the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland.

QUESTION

I.e., until they breed themselves into the republic?

PRIME MINISTER

The "i.e." is yours, not mine!

QUESTION

Mrs. Thatcher, you mention Anglo-Irish parliamentary cooperation at the appropriate time. Is an appropriate time when there would be a devolved administration in Northern Ireland and have you any plans for one?

PRIME MINISTER

Well, the appropriate time would be for both the parliaments to decide. That is why one suggests that this be discussed and debated in Parliament. It could not go ahead unless the Members of Parliament wish it to go ahead. May I say there is already an Anglo-Irish all-party body in the United Kingdom.

QUESTION

Would there be an input from any Northern Ireland devolved Assembly and have you any plans for a devolved Assembly?

PRIME MINISTER

As we have not got a devolved Assembly at the moment, I think the question is just a little bit hypothetical.

QUESTION

Would it not be desirable to have some sort of Northern Ireland representation on this Council immediately?

PRIME MINISTER

Which Council are we talking about?

QUESTION

We are talking about the cooperation council that you have set up today. The Inter-Governmental Council.

PRIME MINISTER

I have the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He has been with me all day.

QUESTION

I am not talking about at ministerial level; I am talking about many MPs and perhaps even officials, even officials of the Northern Ireland Office; will they be involved in this Council?

PRIME MINISTER

But Northern Ireland Office officials include many people from Northern Ireland. The Inter-Governmental Council will consist of visits between Ministers and Officials and, of course, some of those officials will be officials from Northern Ireland Office.

MR. PRIOR

When I went to Dublin 10 days ago, I took with me the Head of the Northern Ireland Office, Mr. Ewett-Bell, and he has been with us all day today, so I think that we want to extend this wherever we can and wherever it is practical to do so.

PRIME MINISTER

The answer to your question: "Would it not be better.." is: they already are.

QUESTION

When do you foresee the stage when Northern Ireland MPs will have a voice on this Council?

PRIME MINISTER

Northern Ireland MPs would come in a parliamentary group. As far as I am aware, they are perfectly free to be part of the Anglo-Irish all-party group already. When you come to Members of Parliament, it is for them to consider whether they would wish to set up the kind of body which is referred to in the communique. The pattern of the communique, really, is

cooperation, for consideration at three levels: one we have set up - the Inter-Governmental Council, that is the governmental cooperation between Ministers and officials - for consideration of Parliament, whether they wish to have a closer cooperation that is represented at the moment by the Anglo-Irish group of MPs - that is the parliamentary level - for them to consider, and you know full well that one can never never do any attempted dictation to Parliament; it is for them to say, in response to a suggestion, whether they find it a good suggestion or not. And then you want the kind of advisory committees of ordinary folk, the Königswinter type of cooperation. We have one with Germany - Königswinter -; we have a Bordeaux Council with France. But you see the pattern: cooperation at the government level; cooperation at the parliamentary level; cooperation at the level of people who have interests both in the United Kingdom and in the Republic.

QUESTION

Prime Minister, I wonder if you could elaborate slightly on the Advisory Committee you see working in association with the Council. What role do you see this committee playing and who would serve on it? Could this be a place for community leaders from the north, for instance, in Northern Ireland, to serve on?

PRIME MINISTER

Well, again, this is what I would call the third level. You have got the governmental level, the parliamentary and an advisory level. There is no more formal thought to it than that, except that we would want it to consist of a number of ordinary people in ordinary organisations, and we have not formulated it any further than that at the moment.

Some people would interpret it as more of the kind of meetings we have at Königswinter and the Bordeaux Council which next year we are having in Edinburgh, so we have an Anglo-Germany advisory council and an Anglo-French advisory council. Whether it gets any more formal than that, I would doubt, but it is there to recognize that if you are going to have closer and closer cooperation and closer friendship between the peoples, it is not only a matter for governments and parliaments, it is a matter for people as well.

PRIME MINISTER

Prime Minister, in that sense, could you - since you obviously place great store by your efforts to create closer cooperation and this is seen as an advance on last summer - could you say now how you expect the people of Northern Ireland to respond to your attitude?

PRIME MINISTER

There are always two parts to this and I always stressed it in two parts. The guarantee to the people of Northern Ireland remains; it is enshrined in our law. At the same time, we believe it is in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland and the people of the whole of the United Kingdom to have friendly relations with the Republic of Ireland.

You know, some of the relationships we have are quite unique. You have only to look at the privileges we extend to one another. They do stem from history and they are much closer in fact than with any other Community country.

We have always said: on the one hand, of course, the guarantee remains; it is enshrined in law, but we do wish to work in the closest friendly relationship with the Republic, and I have not said very much about security because one does not normally, but we do work very closely indeed on security matters, because the Republic of Ireland is just as anxious as we are to eliminate violence and terrorism, which we both recognize as striking fundamentally at democracy itself.

QUESTION (American CBS)

I think the American public would be wondering after the Summit today whether, if there is to be a political solution of any order for Northern Ireland, is it going to come about as a result of joint efforts between London and Dublin - between these two governments - or is it just an affair for the United Kingdom?

PRIME MINISTER

What happens in Northern Ireland has to go through the United Kingdom Parliament and is a matter for the United Kingdom and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is constantly working to find a solution, but I must say that anything which helps to reduce tensions and anyone who can help to reduce tensions is making a positive contribution towards finding a solution and to reconciling the two communities in Northern Ireland.

QUESTION

And that would be the Irish Republic's only role, Prime Minister?

QUESTION

On extradition, Prime Minister, was that discussed and if not, was there anything specific that Unionists could take as comfort from today's talks?

PRIME MINISTER

I hope that they will find quite a bit of comfort in the communique. I repeat again, the guarantee remains; it is to everyone's advantage that one lives at peace, in friendliness and in cooperation with one's neighbours. I have to say it again and again, but that ought to be the normal course of events and we are trying to seek to make it the normal course of events. Extradition was mentioned but was not discussed in any great detail because, as you know, we

have no difficulty with it and actually practise extradition from the United Kingdom to the Republic of Ireland. I think that our friends in the Republic would find very very great difficulty in having extradition themselves.

QUESTION

Prime Minister, could I ask you..the previous Taoiseach, Mr. Haughey, with whom you commenced these joint Anglo-Irish studies, indicated in recent days that he felt the time was appropriate for the setting up of an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Council. In fact, he said that to fail in setting it up would be a failure on the part of his successor. Now, why do you believe the time is inappropriate for some formal parliamentary body of that kind?

PRIME MINISTER

Look! It is not for me to tell Parliament what to do and I am sure that the Taoiseach feels the same. It is not for the Taoiseach to tell Parliament what the Members of Parliament should do and, indeed, if one were to attempt to do so, it would be harmful to what one wished to do and not helpful. You cannot run a parliament that way! You can make a suggestion and then see if Parliament responds and then it is for them to indicate whether they wish to take it further. But I think you got hold of the wrong end of the stick, because I doubt very much whether Mr. Haughey would have thought that in any way he could tell his parliament what to do. I am sure he would not indeed. I mean, we are all much too much parliamentarians for that! And we hope to keep our Members

of Parliament with us and that would be a classic way of getting them all against one!

QUESTION

But at what point would you propose to put the suggestion to Parliament here that this body could be set up?

PRIME MINISTER

The suggestion is in the joint studies that will be published on Wednesday. I think it is in the Summary and it is in the communique, so it is not a question of putting it to them. The joint studies will be published as a House of Commons paper in full - it will be there. It is not a question of putting it to them - it is all there for them all to discuss, and I expect they will wish to discuss and debate quite a lot of it.

QUESTION

So Prime Minister, does this amount to a recommendation to the British Parliament from the British Government?

PRIME MINISTER

No. What it suggests, it says, is just precisely what we mean. Paragraph 8: "The Prime Minister and the Taoiseach agreed it would be for the parliaments concerned to consider at an appropriate time whether there should be an Anglo-Irish body at parliamentary level comprising members to be drawn from the British and Irish Parliaments, the European Parliament and any elected Assembly that may be established in Northern Ireland."

QUESTION

So you conceive that a back-bench MP might put down a motion....picking up the suggestion?

PRIME MINISTER

These matters are discussed between the parties. There is already an Anglo-Irish group which operates between the United Kingdom Parliament and the Republic of Ireland Dail. That is already in existence. You would expect them to have a look at it and see whether they thought it could be extended. That group is not a party political thing; it consists of members from all parties.

QUESTION

Mrs. Thatcher, in the same way - this is a voluntary group that is established at the moment I understand - in the way that you are formalizing ministerial and official contacts, would you intend formalizing voluntary contacts like that in a parliamentary council of some kind?

PRIME MINISTER

There are, in Parliament, a number of groups. There is an Anglo-Irish, there is an Anglo-almost everything. That is a feature of parliamentary life. It would for them and other Members of Parliament to consider whether they wish to make a

more formal framework, but it must be for them to consider. The suggestion is made and it must be for them to consider and it says: "at an appropriate time". Whether they consider it now, whether they would wish to extend it to include European members is a matter for them. There is at this moment no devolved Assembly in Northern Ireland, but you could not possibly do anything more than put up the suggestion, when you are dealing with Members of Parliament. You put up a suggestion, then it has to come from them, and any attempt to force it would not help.

QUESTION

Would you accept, Prime Minister, the thought that your Government is now edging in the direction of the Labour Party's newly-declared policy on Northern Ireland?

PRIME MINISTER

No, before you go any further!

QUESTION

...Ireland by consent...

PRIME MINISTER

No, I am not departing one word from the Act of the previous Conservative Government which the Labour Party did not depart from in government, that the guarantee remains, and that the constitutional status in Northern Ireland would not be changed except by consent of a majority of the people, and I hope I have made that clear again and again and again.

It is for those people to say, and the way and time they say is all laid down in that Act, and I accept what they say.

QUESTION

But that would not be inconsistent with saying that you nevertheless prefer a unification of Ireland, but by consent?

PRIME MINISTER

I am sorry! It would be inconsistent, because you are trying to put words into my mouth as to what I hoped the result of any poll would be. That is not for me to say. It is for me to say that I accept the will of the majority.

QUESTION

Prime Minister, would you agree that there is a widespread feeling in Northern Ireland that even if the British Government is standing by its 1973 Act, it is doing so with an absolute minimum of enthusiasm, and that if there could be some way found of almost getting shot of the problem of Northern Ireland, the British Government would respond with a great deal of enthusiasm and that this may underline some of the anxieties of the Protestants?

PRIME MINISTER

I would not accept what you are saying or the way in which you are saying it. When you have something that is enshrined in law, you do not get up and shout it from the

housetops every day, but it is there and everyone knows it is there and the fact that it is enshrined in law and that that law could only be changed by another Act of Parliament of the United Kingdom Parliament, is the greatest possible guarantee there could be.

QUESTION

Prime Minister, you have said that you agreed on the desirability of restoring electricity interconnection between the two parts of Ireland and that is an interconnection that has been blown up many times and it looks as though it probably will be again in future. Do you intend to restore that interconnection?

PRIME MINISTER

What you have said is just one of the factors one has to take into account and this is one of the things that is being considered now. I am very well aware of that problems; very well aware, but the gas pipelines are not so blown up.

QUESTION

Is there a plan, though, at all, to try and restore that interconnection?

PRIME MINISTER

They are considering these matters now. There is no point unless you can restore it in such a way that it is less likely to be blown up.

QUESTION

Would that also mean that until there is some kind of political resolution then you also will not restore that interconnection?

PRIME MINISTER

It would not necessarily mean that. There are ways and ways of doing these things, some of which make them less easily blown up.

QUESTION

Cross-border courts, Prime Minister. Were they discussed as an alternative to extradition, the beefing-up or increased interest by the DPP in the North in putting evidence up so that it could be considered in a court in the South?

PRIME MINISTER

No. The legal side is also dealt with in the communique in paragraph 6. "Noted with approval the efforts now being made under criminal law jurisdiction legislation to ensure that those who committed crimes in one country should not be able to escape prosecution and conviction by seeking refuge in the other and invited the British and Irish Attorneys General to consider what further improvements to that end might be possible." So the matter goes over to them for their further consideration.

Gentlemen, I have to say that some people are gradually leaching away, apparently to go to another rival press conference

that is going to take place at 6 o'clock at which I think you will probably hear very similar comments to those that you have heard from me, and I hope you will enjoy both equally as much! Thank you very much for coming!
