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SECRET & PERSONAL

Northern Ireland

Taoiseach

At a brief meeting of the negotiating groups in Iveagh House on Saturday two subjects were discussed -

- (1) the developing situation in Northern Ireland; and
- (2) the intergovernmental Conference.

The British side said that, apart from the Commons vote, the Prime Minister had received a large volume of letters from many distinguished people containing enthusiastic congratulations to her on the Agreement.

They said that the opposition to the Agreement, north of the border, was as bad as had been expected and asked if there was any way in which we could help. At present, this opposition was following constitutional lines. They were concerned at what might happen when constitutional methods were exhausted. There could well then be a difficult and possibly dangerous situation in 1986. In particular, they enquired as to whether there was any possibility that the SDLP, and John Hume in particular, might issue a statement of support for the security forces.

The British side were also anxious to know how the nationalist parties were going to operate during the forthcoming by-elections. What strategies would they be following? On this, a question arose as to whether a writ could be moved in the British Parliament when Parliament was not in session. If the writ could not be moved, then there could be a difficult situation for people resigning on 1st January, and expecting a general election later in that month!

The necessity to provide reassurance to the Unionists, and to allow time for moderate unionism to have its voice heard was emphasised. The sort of work which is being done here, to this end, was mentioned. The necessity for the British to stress more, to the Unionist population, what exactly was in the Agreement on the subject of status was also mentioned. The necessity for implementing the Agreement straight as it had been formulated was stressed. The British side emphasised that the Prime Minister was totally committed to just this policy.

Ways of involving Unionists more in the process were discussed. (On this, see the separate note of conversation today with John Cushnahan, Leader of the Alliance Party).

*h. H. ...
to see ...
9/12*

*Mr B. ...
Cushnahan*

...

*S24404 (copy ...
note to ...
S19015)*

On the question of the "prison review" statement, the British said that they were considering this but did not feel that the present time was the most opportune time for using it. At present, under the existing system of review, more people were being released - not directly as a result of the Agreement but simply because that was the way things were working. They would consider further whether circumstances would permit them to use the prison review draft, or something like it. This would seem to be, pre-eminently, a matter which the Conference might consider, in secret session.

On the Intergovernmental Conference, the British said that what they feared now was not so much the terrorist problem but that of public order. A Grand Committee of the Assembly had been established and would have its first meeting on Tuesday only a hundred yards away from where the Conference might be meeting. It would be the easiest thing in the world for this Grand Committee to organise itself and a mob to obstruct the Conference. They could, in fact, organise quite a large demonstration within a few hours, simply by calling on Hazland and Wolf and other workers in the vicinity. The whole issue would be assessed on Monday and it was likely that the Secretary of State would be contacting the Minister for Foreign Affairs on the subject, when this assessment was complete. At present, they did not know how the assessment would go. It could favour present arrangements, or, perhaps, a change.

The large political implication of a change of venue was stressed by the Irish side, who, however, reserved their position until the outcome of the security review was known.

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9 December 1985.

c.c.

Tánaiste
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Minister for Justice
Attorney General

Ambassador Dorr,
Messrs Ward, Donlon, Lillis
O Tuathail