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Thatcher
Minister
Secretary for Justice
A. S.
Secretary for Wales
Mr. G. Jones

Hume-Thatcher Meeting of 17 January, 1985

Hume met Thatcher at her request. Following is an account of the points which impressed him at the meeting.

She began by saying that the exchanges at Chequers had been a great deal better than people thought. It had been one of the best meetings she had ever had. She was now committed to trying to do something about the problem.

Thatcher had said that the Communique had set out the parameters of any action that could be undertaken. One of the most important parameters was that the consent of the people of Northern Ireland would be necessary to what happened to them. 'We can't impose anything on you people'.

Hume had said that the immediate and perhaps greatest problem was the absence of order in the Catholic community. The problem was now such that it could not be solved in the limited context of Northern Ireland. A solution had to transcend Northern Ireland.

Hurd who was also present along with Alison, Thatcher's Parliamentary Private Secretary, asked whether improvements in the police complaints procedures would not help.

Hume said that you could have as many police complaints procedures as you could imagine and you would still not solve the problem. He said that the British were probably fed up at the number of complaints they receive. He said that had the Irish police been involved in the incidents which were the subject of complaints there would probably not have been the sorts of complaints which had been made. Before the troubles his home town of Derry had been an extremely law abiding place with a level of violence and crime way below the average in Britain.

He said that the people were basically law abiding but that they wanted an authority to which they could give their loyalty. This could not be done without the 'involvement' of Dublin.

Thatcher interrupted him to say 'involvement?'

Hume said that the problem could not be solved within the strict conference of Northern Ireland a solution must involve the two governments.

Thatcher had said 'yes, the two governments must talk. So must you'. A discussion followed on the prospects of talks in Northern Ireland between the parties. Thatcher reviewed the various efforts since 1974 to get talks going.

Hume said that the SDLP had been the one party that had accepted the guidelines laid down by the British in 1973 ever since. Unionists had at all times rejected them. On the occasion of the last election to the Assembly, Hume had asked for a guarantee that the Unionists would accept those guidelines. The Unionists had turned that down. He said that he had no objection to talks and that he felt that Paisley had now found a formula which would make talks possible. He said that there was however, a new problem which he had not mentioned either in public or in private i.e. that public talks which failed could be very damaging to the SDLP in the advance of the local elections of 15 May. He said that his own impression was that Unionists may well be simply pretending to be "reasonable" and that nothing in his experience was encouraging.

Thatcher said that she found this very reasonable. Turning to Hurd she said: is it not up to us to establish by our methods what is the position of the Unionists and to let you know?

(Note: Hume considered this to be an extremely important point).

Hume said that she seemed to be proceeding on the basis that it was possible that the parties in Northern Ireland would agree among themselves. He felt that the situation was such that that would be impossible. You would only get a solution in a wider context.

Thatcher (as she had done at Chequers) talked about the appointed boards which ran the functions previously implemented by elected local government.

Hume acknowledged that the Housing Executive in particular was doing very good work.

Thatcher observed that appointed authorities seemed to be acting fairly well while elected authorities were acting unfairly. Turning to Hurd she asked: "is that not the way forward?". (Note: Hume considered this to be an extremely important point also).

Hume said that local government provided a case in point and mentioned the continuing discrimination which took place.

Thatcher said "I want to say to you that anywhere your party is running local government it is fair and seen to be fair and that must say something". She went on that the same could not be said for the Unionists.

Thatcher said that the two governments would continue to talk; she is determined that this will continue "but you people must also try".

Hume, whose recollection of the exchanges was slightly disjointed, recalled that at a certain point, she had said to him "to be frank power sharing would be very difficult". Hume had said in reply that the SDLP could not contemplate anything less.

Thatcher had also said that it is "important to us that the constitutional parties are there and that they have a positive role".

Thatcher had asked whether many Catholics might join the police if the set-up were changed. Hume said that they would and in fact a lot of them had now joined the Garda Siochana. Thatcher: "do they really"? Hume said "yes, mine are a law abiding people".

Thatcher had spoken warmly repeatedly of Taoiseach.

In conclusion Thatcher said to Hume recalling that they had met now on three occasions: "the first time that we met you said to me that I did not understand how people could have different loyalties. I understand that a lot more now". The atmosphere throughout the meeting was friendly and positive. Unusually, Thatcher took copious notes. The meeting lasted a full hour.

Hume's overall comments were: the British are trying to operate on two levels; the Anglo-Irish inter governmental level and second the level of devolution. Thatcher does want to do something but she is "very strong" on the "guarantee". What is done must be within the parameters of the communique so far as she is concerned. He feels that she now knows a bit more about the situation than she did.

22/1/85