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10 DOWNING STREET  
LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Private Secretary

26 March 1996

Dear Martin,

**NORTHERN IRELAND:  
MEETING WITH THE FOUR CHURCH LEADERS**

The Prime Minister met for an hour this afternoon with the leaders of the four main Churches: the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, Lord Eames, the Catholic Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, Cardinal Cahal Daly, the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Right Rev Dr John Ross, and the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Rev Christopher Walpole. The General Secretaries of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches, the Rev Samuel Hutchinson and the Rev Edmund Mawhinney, were also present. Sir John Wheeler attended on our side.

The Prime Minister recapped on recent developments, on the usual private basis. Every point that the Government had put forward had been unacceptable to one party or another. He had hoped not to have to impose an electoral system. In the end, he had had to propose a system that no Party liked, but which none had been able to reject. We still did not know if all the parties would participate in the elections, or whether there would be renewed violence. But there was no other way of carrying the process forward. All the other routes were blocked. The parliamentary consensus in London was helpful, if fragile.

Voter education

Archbishop Eames said that an extensive educational programme was needed if the present momentum was to be sustained. Every household should be given an idea of what the election involved. Over the weekend, it had become clear that there was a great deal of confusion, not least in the UUP. Cardinal Daly said that we needed to elucidate for the voters how the constituency list system worked, and the regional top-up. Eames added that we should also clarify the link between the elected forum and the all-party

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negotiations. It was vital to minimise the opportunity for people to be manipulated by confusion. The Prime Minister said that the system was clear. Only one vote would be required of each person. There was no reason for any confusion. This was being deliberately spread. But, for all that, Eames and Daly might well be right. We would look at this point very carefully. Eames agreed that there was deliberate obfuscation. We all needed to work against this.

Decommissioning

The Rev Walpole argued that this issue was a serious stumbling block, and could bring the collapse of the talks. How to proceed? The Prime Minister said that it was not a question of the Government gratuitously raising the issue: it had always been there. Some of the parties were always going to insist on it. Throughout the peace process to date, we had made progress step by step, taking each fence as it came, one at a time. If he tried to suggest now how the decommissioning issue might be dealt with down the road, one or other party would knock it down. He thought in fact that he could see a way through. He would deploy this when the time was right. However, another bomb like that on the London bus could make all progress impossible. Daly sympathised. He agreed with the "one fence at a time" approach.

The Prime Minister thought that, in the end, Sinn Fein would participate in the elections (Daly agreed). The question then was the nature of the ceasefire. Would the IRA declare this just before the negotiations, as a tactic of convenience? What would it then be worth? If and when negotiations got underway, progress would be made through bilateral deals outside the talks, not in the formal sessions.

Prisoners

Both Walpole and Eames saw the treatment of IRA and Loyalist prisoners as a key to progress, and specifically to a new ceasefire. Eames quite appreciated the difficulty of giving the prisoners any latitude over reviewing their sentences, when there was still no ceasefire. But any gesture in that area would have a beneficial overall effect, including with the mainstream parties, without necessarily involving the Government in loss of face. For the Loyalist paramilitaries, whom he knew best, a review of long sentences was specifically important. It was not a question of needing new regulations: simply of using the discretion available to the Government under those that already existed.

Ross and Daly asked about Patrick Kelly, while conceding they did not know the detailed background. The Prime Minister said that he did. Kelly's doctors said that he was not remotely about to die. He had cancer. But it was not life-threatening in other than the longer-term. We were sending this

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medical advice to Dublin. The Prime Minister explained how the Home Secretary's quasi-judicial function on this issue ruled out political influence being brought to bear. Contacts were already in train with Dublin on this subject, and would continue.

Sir John Wheeler added that the Secretary of State and he had required that any change in Kelly's present medical condition should be reported to them on a daily basis. More generally, he noted that the changes in remission announced last August, in addition to the more generous arrangements already in force in Northern Ireland, made further progress on this front difficult.

The Prime Minister recalled that our relaxation of the remission arrangements last August had been conditional on there being no breach of the ceasefire. We had not in fact retightened these arrangements since the Canary Wharf bomb. This had not yet been publicly focussed upon. Progress would become harder if it was. But to some degree, the moment for such pressure was passing, unless there were to be another bomb. Daly said that he was about to send Sir John Wheeler a long letter on the Casement 3, which he had held back when the South Quay bomb first went off.

Daly concluded that the more we could do to improve the general quality of life for people in Northern Ireland, the harder a return to violence would become. Even if progress was blocked on the political side, there were other ways of achieving this, e.g. through our approach towards prisoners, policing and economic development (including fair employment). It would be helpful if progress could be made on all these fronts as soon as possible. He appreciated what the Prime Minister had said about Kelly. But a move to Portlaoise would have a very positive effect, were that to become possible.

The Prime Minister asked if Daly had a sense of how the Nationalist prisoners saw political prospects. Daly said that his hunch - no more - was that they had a positive view of the need for negotiations.

Security and policing levels

Eames said that the security forces' reaction when the ceasefire ended had been just right. The crucial point was that it had been proportionate. People did not think that normality had ended overnight. This had been noted and appreciated. Had we considered how to respond in the doomsday scenario of an end to the negotiations, with the IRA back on the rampage? He hoped that, however great the provocation, we would continue not to overreact and to avoid e.g. selective internment. Much would be achieved this way.

The Prime Minister said that we had consistently tried not to overreact. But there was a real danger that tit for tat responses could wreck the process.

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Eames agreed that it would not be possible to hold the line with the Loyalist paramilitaries if the IRA exploded another large bomb. Sir John Wheeler said that nevertheless our response should be proportionate and adjusted on a day-by-day basis.

Eames said that the popular will for peace had brought the people of Northern Ireland onto the streets. We should accept this and encourage it. But we should also use it constructively, otherwise it would eventually dissipate. People power would not in the end defeat violence by itself. There needed to be a parallel political process and structure into which the wishes of the people could be channelled. The Prime Minister agreed.

Confidence-building measures

The Rev Walpole said that we should not lose sight of the wider elements of the Mitchell Report, including in particular its confidence-building elements, e.g. accounting for missing persons. Most of his Council's other concerns the Prime Minister had already taken on board, including the need to keep the people involved, including perhaps via a referendum at the end of the process. The Prime Minister agreed on both points. The Mitchell Report should be seen in its totality. And a referendum at the end of the process had always been part of his position: specifically, it was stage 2 of the triple lock.

Action for Churches

Cardinal Daly said the Prime Minister had been very frank and open. The Churches had told him what they thought he should be doing. What did he think they should be doing?

The Prime Minister said that it would be very helpful if the Church leaders felt they could:

- underline that the route through elections was the only credible way ahead. There were no viable alternatives.
- remind people of the wider substance of the Mitchell Report, including parallel decommissioning and the confidence-building measures mentioned by the Rev Walpole.
- to alleviate the atmosphere of mistrust, for instance by explaining that the Government was not addressing this issue out of self-interest. It could easily have decided to leave the whole subject alone. It was genuinely working for a solution.

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Stress that a lasting ceasefire would bring a huge change to people's quality of life. The last 18 months had brought substantial change. But this would be as nothing compared to what could be looked forward to once we got through elections to the all-party talks. Progress there could unleash a flood of good will and, especially, of inward investment that would transform economic prospects, employment levels and living standards. We could not compel the parties to come to the table. We could only facilitate this. But their risk in taking part was nil. At the end of the day, there would always be a referendum. So they should participate in the elections, and the negotiations, and not grandstand.

Sir John Wheeler added that the marching season was approaching. Sinn Fein were looking to make capital. They seemed intent on confrontation. This would make the RUC's position even more difficult. He was doing all he could to prevent confrontation. He hoped that, for their part, the Churches would do all they could to encourage people on both sides to draw back. Dr Ross said that they were looking actively at this. They recognised the delicacy of the problem. They were seeing what they could do.

Press release

The Church Leaders produced a draft press release, which the Prime Minister agreed on the spot. He suggested they make only one change. They should add that he had made clear his readiness to see the Church Leaders at any time. His door was always open. The Church Leaders expressed warm appreciation.

I am copying this letter to Jan Polley (Cabinet Office) and to Veronica Sutherland (Dublin).

*Yours ever,*

*Edward Oakden*

EDWARD OAKDEN

Martin Howard Esq  
Northern Ireland Office

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**PRESS RELEASE****The Four Church Leaders Visit Prime Minister**

As part of their continuing support for the peace process the Leaders of the Four Main Churches visited the Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street this afternoon. This meeting followed a similar visit to the Taoiseach in Dublin.

The Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, the President of the Methodist Church, the Cardinal Archbishop of Armagh and the Church of Ireland Primate discussed the current situation in Northern Ireland with particular reference to the role of the Churches. They expressed their concerns at the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire and their support for all efforts to encourage the political parties to engage in meaningful dialogue. The Prime Minister expressed his appreciation of the work of the Churches in Northern Ireland and reiterated his readiness to see the Church Leaders at any time.

Sir John Wheeler was also in attendance.