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Meeting between Ministers for Justice and Foreign Affairs
and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, London,
5 October 1979

Summary of Political Discussion

At the beginning of the afternoon session, the Minister for Foreign Affairs welcomed the opportunity to discuss political developments. He put his remarks in the context of the desire of the Government to support reconciliation and partnership in Northern Ireland and thus to contribute to the isolation of the men of violence. He also referred to the favourable atmosphere generated by developments since the Downing Street meeting of 5 September, including the reactions to that meeting, the absence of subsequent recrimination, the Taoiseach's Waterville speech and his own U.N. address and the effect of the Papal visit.

The Minister remarked that there were forces in Northern Ireland which have to be released from fear and from their present isolation. There is also a growing international understanding of the Northern Ireland problem and growing support from our Community partners, which expresses itself in the Agreement of the Nine and in the Trevi cooperation. There is also support from people who count in the U.S., which is tending to isolate Biaggi and his associates. Our friends around the world, the Minister said, are ready to give support, particularly to the British Government in the initiative they are about to undertake.

The Minister pointed out that Paisley had destroyed a succession of Unionist leaders who had tried to make progress. A Paisley veto therefore could not be accepted. Recent polls had shown that there was a majority in Britain and in the South (and probably in Northern Ireland also) as well as throughout the world for the ideas of partnership and acceptability. It was, the Minister said, vital to get the political process underway and extremist loyalist demands could not be the criterion of what was acceptable. People in the North must be released from fear, including unreal fears.

The Minister referred to Mr. Atkins' remark of 27 June that he would only have one chance in Northern Ireland but emphasised that any initiative must include acceptability to both communities and partnership structures. The simple majority in Northern Ireland was an artificial creation and the normal rules could not therefore be invoked. The pattern of local government problems over the years was well known.

The Minister said that it would probably not be possible to get a complete solution all at once. Accordingly it was necessary to take a first step, in the confidence that, by persuasion, progress could be made on this basis. The present British Government has, the Minister said, a welcome secure majority and the Irish Government hoped that they would be able to use it in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State, in response, said that the British Government was totally committed to giving people in Northern Ireland more control over their own affairs and he had been working extremely hard on this in private conversations with the four main political leaders. These conversations had been confidential and useful. He had not told them of the progress of his discussions with the others and could not tell third parties. While there had been progress, he was very sensitive to the importance of climate and of timing in bringing forward formal proposals, which mustn't be too soon and mustn't be too late. He concluded by giving a summary of what he had said at Ballymoney on 2 October and said he could not go beyond that at this stage.

The Secretary of State agreed that acceptability was the key and said that an attempt to impose a solution had been disastrous in the past. Progress was not entirely in the hands of the British Government as had been recognised by the Prime Minister's statement on the recent Papal visit. The British Government genuinely recognised the interest of the Irish Government and would keep the Irish Government informed. When the British Government was ready to take an initiative, it would also keep the Irish Government informed.

The Secretary of State said that there was no difference on the need for interim steps and in particular for "a return to democracy" and for the people of Northern Ireland to control their own destiny.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs drew attention to the implications of the phrase "return to democracy". The Minister also insisted that the involvement of the Irish Government was more than an "interest". We were intimately involved, most obviously in the security effort, and had therefore a right to a certain influence. The Minister for Justice added that the Irish Government was doing everything possible on security. However, in an atmosphere of political progress, it might be possible to do even more.