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PS/Secretary of State (B & L)

cc PS/Ministers (B & L)
PS/PUS (B & L)
Mr Brennan
Mr Stephens
Dr Hayes
Mr Carvill
Mr Merifield
Mr Abbott
Mr Lyon
Mr Reeve
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Mr Bickham

BRITISH POLICY ON NORTHERN IRELAND: A ROBUST DEFENCE

1. If, at some stage, the Anglo-Irish process is aborted, or if it is carried forward to a conclusion which fails to satisfy proponents of the New Ireland Forum approach, it is to be expected that HMG will be subjected to fierce and potentially damaging criticism from the Irish and from their sympathisers in the United States, and perhaps from other quarters as well.
2. There is, in my view, a robust defence of the government's policy and approach which can be mounted at that stage. But it would be mounted from an unfavourable position. We would not have the initiative, and might find it difficult to regain it.
3. It is, I would suggest, at any rate worth considering whether such a defence, which would have to be mounted in terms not likely to prejudice possible progress towards an internal settlement or an Anglo-Irish understanding, should not be at least constructed and possibly revealed before rather than after a point of crisis is reached. In the teeth of much unreasonable and ill-informed criticism, we have so far chosen by and large to turn the other cheek, so as not to diminish the prospects of productive dialogue with the Republic. But one does not have to go along with the approach taken by the famous Willie John McBride as Irish rugby captain ("Always get your retaliation in first") to see some possible advantages in drawing a line sooner rather than later in certain key areas.
4. I have therefore sought to construct, and I attach, a series of arguments which it could be useful to deploy at some stage. For the sake of convenience I have written this in the form of a coherent narrative, but it will be seen that a number of points are separately addressed.

K.P. Bloomfield

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15 March 1985

A ROBUST DEFENCE

1. There have, from time to time, been serious misrepresentations and misunderstanding of the British Government's approach to the problems of Northern Ireland. It is better that criticisms should be identified and examined in the open. A failure to speak clearly is not a constructive contribution to dialogue.

SERIOUSNESS OF THE PROBLEM FOR THE UK

2. It is sometimes alleged that the British Government does not treat the problem of Northern Ireland with proper seriousness and priority. In dealing with this suggestion, it may be helpful to express some of the events of recent years in comparative terms. The threat posed by the IRA has been mounted not only against the people and the prospects of Northern Ireland itself - where grievous damage has been done and all too many lives lost or blighted - but against the democratic system and the national life of Britain as a sovereign and democratic state.
3. To make what has been happening more vivid for observers outside the United Kingdom, let me describe some of the events in terms of their American equivalent. A close relative of the President, a person honoured both nationally and internationally, has been blown up, with his family, on a sailing holiday [Lord Mountbatten]. As preparations for the Presidential Election are being completed the President's Chief of Staff is assassinated in his car within the precincts of Congress [Airey Neave]. At the Convention of the party in power, the hotel in which the President and his closest colleagues and associates are staying is attacked. The President himself has a most fortunate escape [Mrs Thatcher], the Majority Whip in the House of Representatives is seriously injured and his wife killed [Mr Wakeham]; one of the most senior members of the President's Cabinet is also gravely injured, and his wife left paralysed [Mr Tebbit]. In New York there is a serious explosion outside Bloomingdale's, with death and injury to innocent bystanders [the Harrods bombing]. On their way to a ceremonial occasion in Washington, an elite detachment of the US armed services held in particularly high regard throughout the country, are the victims of another massive explosion [the attack on the Lifeguards].

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4. These, in their British equivalent, have been some of the actual assaults mounted upon our democracy in Britain, and it is simply grotesque to suggest that we do not take such events with the greatest seriousness or that we are faltering in our search for effective remedies in this ugly situation.

RELEVANCE OF SECURITY MEASURES TO POLITICAL PROGRESS

5. In our reaction to such events, it is sometimes suggested that we are seeking to find through security measures the answers to what are essentially political problems. Again, this is a total and grave misconception. Of course we seek to confront this subversive organisation through a robust security policy, maintaining nevertheless our consistent stance that we aim to bring criminals to justice under the law. We do this, not as an alternative to political process, but to make political process feasible. This terrorism can only poison, and it is deliberately designed to poison, any wholesome and healing political dialogue.
6. There is no political outcome which is seen by realistic people as feasible which would bring about the voluntary abandonment of this campaign. The IRA have made it clear that they are interested in nothing less than the imposition of their own curious form of military dictatorship on the whole of Ireland. When, in 1974, some incipient political agreement was trying to flourish, the IRA did not abandon but redoubled their efforts. Those who are the enemies of Margaret Thatcher and Garrett FitzGerald today, stand ready to be the enemies of Neil Kinnock or David Owen or David Steel or Charles Haughey tomorrow. This is not my interpretation or gloss of their intentions or motives. All we have to do is to read and mark their own words.

IMPLICATIONS OF FORUM REPORT

7. Then it is suggested that we have available, in the Report of the New Ireland Forum, an important contribution to political dialogue and debate which we and the British Government have failed to take seriously. On the contrary, the British Government has studied this interesting and important document with the greatest care. At its heart and core there is a very welcome and well-argued acknowledgement of the existence within Northern Ireland of certain characteristics, certain feelings about culture and ethos and identity, which can be

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described in shorthand as the "Britishness" and the "Irishness" of the two communities in the North.

8. But it is very significant, is it not, that the preferred solution of the parties endorsing the Forum approach is in the pattern of a unitary Irish State? Of course other models are tabled too - although it is noteworthy that the largest party of all in the Republic does not seem to take those other models seriously. Of course it is argued that a unitary state or any other acceptable solution can only come about through agreement, and that too is most welcome. But the central logic and thrust of the Report is that the characteristics of the majority community - what I have described as their "Britishness" - can be safeguarded and preserved within an Irish, rather than a British, context. If, however, it is regarded as moral and practicable to accommodate the "Britishness" of one community by means which do not include continuing membership of the British State, why should one conclude that it is less moral and less practicable to accommodate the "Irishness" of the other community by means which do not include membership of the Irish State? Can it be logical to suggest that it would be right to take a majority of some one million people into an Irish State to which they have never belonged, and wholly wrong to leave half that number in the British State to which they and their ancestors have belonged since the beginning of the 19th Century?

9. That, after all, is the actual choice before us. People cannot really live in two states at the same time. It may, of course, be said that the unitary state envisaged in the Forum Report - that hypothetical state embodying a million people retaining a sense of "Britishness" - would be bound to enjoy a special relationship with Britain. But that ignores, does it not, the reality that the British State -embodying in Northern Ireland some half a million people with a sense of "Irishness" - already has a special relationship with Ireland? Any vision of Britain, as seen from Ireland, as an alien and unfriendly state is miles wide of the mark. We have a special sympathy for Irish national interests. We accommodate on the British mainland very large numbers of Irish people, many of them still Irish citizens, who vote in our national elections. Irish people are prominent and respected in every sphere of our national life. Of course we did not always in the past behave with moderation and good judgement in our dealings with Ireland. But other European countries with far more recent animosities, expressed in open and terrible violence, have long since turned to wiser and more co-operative channels.

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10. We have to ask the question: is it really less likely that the United Kingdom, a liberal and pluralist state of 55 million people, accommodating within its structure the distinctive national identities of the Scotch and Welsh as well as the English, increasingly multi-racial, committed to the elimination of discrimination against any of its citizens or any group of them, is less well able to accommodate the interests of over half a million Northern Irish people who preserve a sense of "Irishness", than a unitary Irish State, successor to a much more homogeneous Irish Republic, would be able to accommodate almost one million people, some 20% of its whole population, preserving a sense of "Britishness"?

11. What the position of that million people would actually be in a unitary Irish State is a hypothetical question. There has been much talk of potential pluralism in principle; less evidence, sometimes, in practice. On the other hand, the position within the UK of the Northern Ireland minority of over half a million is not hypothetical but actual. We can therefore look at how they stand; how, in a sense, they fit the central model of the Forum Report that a unitary nation state can accommodate within itself, in justice and equity, a minority which has a continuing feeling of distinctive and separate identity. What about the "Irishness" of the minority in the North? Is it, as some would suppose, frowned upon by the British sovereign power? Is it discouraged or ruthlessly suppressed?

RECOGNITION OF "IRISH IDENTITY"

12. Such is not the case. That minority maintains, by its own free choice, a separate and distinctive system of education, embracing not only schools but the institutions which train teachers. Those schools are free to inculcate in their pupils, and do commonly inculcate in them, respect for Irish national song, dance, language, history, sport and tradition. That system is supported in very large measure from public funds. Although the majority of organised workers in Northern Ireland are members of trade unions with headquarters in Great Britain, the unions in Northern Ireland choose to be affiliated to an Irish organisation, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions. The British Government readily accepts that situation. Very many people who live and work and vote in Northern Ireland choose, when they travel abroad, to avail themselves of an Irish passport. This is regarded as an entirely private matter for them, and does not influence in any way their treatment by the state or its organs. People whose sense of "Irishness" is beyond question occupy many important positions of public responsibility and influence. We have an entrenched

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constitutional prohibition of discrimination on religious and political grounds. Of course there may be further ways in which, without thereby prejudicing the rights of the majority, we can recognise and respect the distinctive identity of the minority and protect its interests. We are, and should be, assiduous in the search for any such means.

13. But what we cannot do, and will not do, is to coerce one million of our fellow citizens - as much members of the United Kingdom family as any Englishman is - into a United Ireland against their will, or abdicate our current responsibilities so as to permit or facilitate the coercion of them by others. We shall also cherish, no less than these people, that other community, many of whom, we know, have other aspirations. But we live in the real world where it is not possible to satisfy in full the sometimes conflicting aspirations of every element in the community. We shall seek, of course, the utmost co-operation between the two communities in the good government of Northern Ireland. Every shred of influence we possess has been deployed, and will continue to be deployed, to promote a process of dialogue and reconciliation. But we cannot impose goodwill or legislate for understanding. Co-operation will come about when the people concerned realise that it is, in the widest sense, in the interests of all of them.

SUMMARY OF HMG'S POLICY

14. In summary, then:

We do not treat the situation lightly; it is a problem of great seriousness affecting the life of the nation. We are already deeply committed to do all that is practicable and reasonable to resolve it.

We do not seek to solve a political problem by security means. But we do seek to prevent the strangulation of the political process by violence directed to that end.

We do not ignore or discount or treat lightly the Report of the New Ireland Forum. But we do challenge the inference that, as long as a conflict of aspirations between the two communities exists, there is a special inevitability or morality about movement from a British to an Irish context.

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Above all, we do not accept that a sense of Irishness cannot be fostered within the existing constitutional framework, unless and until there is a majority consent to change that framework.

Our determination to ensure fairness and to seek reconciliation is total.

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