

NATIONAL ARCHIVES

IRELAND



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Meeting with Prime Minister ThatcherSteering NoteObjectives

1. These might be defined as

- securing Mrs Thatcher's attention to Northern Ireland as a serious and increasingly threatening problem;
- securing a realisation leading to a commitment on her part that real progress must be seen to be made in the Anglo-Irish framework if the dangerous process of alienation among Northern nationalists is even to be contained, let alone reversed;
- specifically, creating some awareness on her part that hanging Irish terrorists would have a catastrophic effect in Ireland North and South and on Anglo-Irish relations;
- again specifically, convincing her that the New Ireland Forum process is a responsible and important enterprise which, if successful, could be useful to the interests of both countries;
- finally and also specifically, securing agreement on Encounter.

Obstacles

2. Mrs Thatcher's post-election mood is likely to be one of heady and reinforced certitude about a series of dearly-held principles some of which are starkly relevant to Anglo-Irish problems. She may not be open to conviction. Her own Fortress Falklands nationalism clearly attracted considerable popular support and itself stirred deep patriotic feeling among the British people: it would seem logical to assume that these two factors acting on each other have made her less amenable to Irish nationalist anxieties and less doubtful than ever about the validity or the viability of the British role in Ireland and notably the integrity of the U.K.
3. Set against this stiffened chauvinism, the concerns of Irish nationalism are likely to be seen as inherently adversarial and possibly in some cases (e.g. the hanging issue) irreconcilable. They may also be seen as somewhat irrational or contemptible (whining).

Naturally all of the outrages (as she would conceive them) of the recent past - the Neave murder, the post-Dublin Summit breakdown, the hunger strike, the Falklands disagreement - constitute powerful evidence of the implacable hostility of Irish nationalism and the untrustworthiness of even its democratic exponents.

4. It is hard to escape the feeling in London that the present leadership in Dublin, including specifically the Taoiseach, has lacked the reassuring firmness, consistency and clarity which have been so successfully projected by Mrs Thatcher. There are also doubts about the durability of the Coalition. These perceptions are not conducive to confidence nor to undertaking major endeavours in common.
5. The re-election of Powell must be seen as unfortunate from our point of view. His influence with Mrs Thatcher, whom he meets regularly, has been growing. His fundamentalism on the British constitution, while rejected on membership of the Community, is probably highly congenial in its reference to Ireland to the current mood of Mrs Thatcher and the true blue Thatcherites. His intellectual ascendancy over Molyneaux, coupled with Molyneaux's unexpectedly fine showing in the election and the reassuring effects of a Thatcherite Tory majority on Unionism generally, are other unhelpful factors of which Mrs Thatcher may well be aware and which may strengthen her own Unionist political sympathies.
6. There is evidence that Mrs Thatcher saw the hunger strike crisis as a direct personal struggle between her political and moral authority and the IRA. Her view, which seemingly admits of no doubt or nuance, probably was and is that right and truth prevailed. Our information is that she will not accept that her stern obduracy contributed to the present problem of alienation among Northern nationalists. This will make it particularly difficult to penetrate her stated conviction that terrorists should be hanged for their crimes of murder.

Political Danger

7. The daunting task of influencing Mrs Thatcher in her present mood is complicated by the danger that, because of her attitude to the previous Administration in Dublin, she might instinctively seek to

cast the Taoiseach in the role of Britain's friend in Ireland. This danger should be borne in mind particularly in any attempt the Taoiseach might undertake to convince Mrs Thatcher of the advantages to Britain of current Irish policy on Northern Ireland.

Long-term Perspective

8. Several British commentators have already concluded that Mrs Thatcher will be unbeatable in five years time. This may be a hasty judgement but, such are the difficulties of the Labour Party and the electoral obstacles likely to continue in the way of the Alliance, that it is difficult to question its validity now. Mrs Thatcher may well govern for the decade ahead. It would at least seem advisable that the Taoiseach's approach should be in that perspective.

Possible Approach

9. It is suggested that the Taoiseach should begin by congratulating Mrs Thatcher on her notable electoral triumph. He might repeat his statement that he is heartened that there is a secure Administration in London which his own Government, secure also for several years ahead, now looks forward eagerly to working with.
10. The Taoiseach might, taking the high ground so to speak, seek to urge on Mrs Thatcher the view that, not alone must the daunting and worsening crisis of Northern Ireland be confronted and contained, but he and she must jointly make a commitment to work towards ending it. She has unprecedented authority to attempt this: it is moreover an historic task greater than any in the unhappy chronicle of Anglo-Irish relations.
11. This means that he the Taoiseach must accept that the reality of Unionism must be acknowledged and cannot be wished away or ignored and similarly she the Prime Minister must accept that no institutional soporific will placate or extirpate Irish nationalism, an irreducible reality. The Taoiseach for his part is engaged in trying to create an acceptance of Unionism throughout our political system and on the part of Northern nationalists through the Forum. This is a difficult and thankless

endeavour politically but if successful it could result in a full acceptance of the Unionist reality by non-violent Irish nationalism throughout Ireland. This would help to create an atmosphere of realism which would promote stability.

12. He, the Taoiseach, would invite Mrs Thatcher similarly to embark on a complementary effort to help her own public opinion and particularly Unionists to face up to the reality of Irish nationalism. Both efforts would be a true incarnation of their joint commitment in November 1981 to make efforts to promote reconciliation.
13. The Taoiseach might perhaps say that even Dublin had been excessively complacent in recent years about the state of nationalist opinion in Northern Ireland. We had underestimated the toll of failure and frustration of political initiative after political initiative. Like the British we had been dismayed by the rise in political support for Sinn Féin. We now have a major and worsening problem but not an irremediable problem.
14. Capital Punishment: this is a difficult issue to approach. Ideally it should be raised by Mrs Thatcher herself. On the other hand given the real danger of ^avery early development by way of Private Member's Motion on Bill it seems important that for the sake of ^{the} record the Taoiseach give his view to the Prime Minister. One approach might be to say that security cooperation continues energetically but that it is essential that each Government consult the other on any major departure in the fight against terrorism e.g. capital punishment. The Taoiseach might go on to say that facing the reality of Irish nationalism means facing the difficult fact that hanging Irish nationalist terrorists would be a catastrophe for all of us. Nothing would be more likely to destabilise Irish nationalist opinion and to create sympathy for the IRA throughout Ireland and indeed elsewhere, especially the U.S. The situation would quickly become worse than anything we had experienced in the past thirteen years. We understand fully and sympathise with her feelings about the IRA, INLA etc. - we have similarly strong feelings. It is essential, even from the viewpoint of the security of British personnel in Northern Ireland, that nothing happen which would create much more widespread tolerance or even approval of their being killed.
15. The SDLP, the voice of constitutional nationalism in Northern Ireland, did well in the elections in very difficult circumstances. They increased their total vote by 20,000. While worried about Sinn Féin's vote, we are somewhat reassured by that of the SDLP. Mr Hume, their only successful candidate, is an able man and a major opponent of the Provisional IRA. It is essential that he be seen to have influence on events.

16. British Governments have in the past most unfortunately had contact with the leadership of the IRA. This has, of course, encouraged the IRA to press forward in its campaign and has been greatly resented by Irish Governments and constitutional nationalists in Northern Ireland whose credibility it has damaged. Unless and until Provisional Sinn Féin repudiate violence unambiguously we would insist that there be no contact with them on the part of British officials at any level. (The Taoiseach might suggest that he and Mrs Thatcher should together ask Gaston Thorn to ensure that the Commission and its offices in Ireland and Britain should similarly refuse to have any contact with Sinn Féin - in conveying this to Thorn the Taoiseach might stress that no criticism was intended of the Head of the Belfast Office, who had indeed been useful to the cause of reconciliation in Northern Ireland.) The Taoiseach might also mention the contrast in relation to broadcasting as well as the exclusion of elected members of Sinn Féin from the Forum. It is suggested the Taoiseach should not mention the Kelly hunger-strike.
17. The Anglo-Irish Summit process: ideally we would prefer to focus our efforts now on the New Ireland Forum with a view to creating a new and realistic consensus on the part of Government and Opposition in Dublin and the SDLP in the North before formally resuming the Summit process. Circumstances - particularly the dangerously drifting state of nationalist opinion in Northern Ireland and the new "legitimacy" of the IRA - do not permit this. It is essential that constitutional politicians are seen to be working and making progress. It would be useful in that sense and even in the subsidiary sense of concentrating minds in the Forum were the two Heads of Government to agree now to a formal meeting at the end of the year, an agreement that might be announced in a few weeks, perhaps when agreement on the Encounter organisation was announced.
18. There seems to be agreement on the establishment of Encounter. This is really the least significant of the bodies envisaged under the 1981 communiqué but important in itself for all that. The two Chairmen who are envisaged are excellent people - we should encourage both to make the most of their responsibilities. It would be a mistake to attempt to represent Encounter publicly as being more than it is - a worthy and worthwhile forum for essentially non-governmental exchange. It might be useful and even reassuring if it could meet in Belfast as often as possible.

9. We were glad to see Jim Prior reappointed although we do not agree with several of his positions. What was useful about her re-appointment of him was that it was a welcome departure from the pattern of changing Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland every two years at most.
20. Together we face a tragic and deeply worrying crisis. For Dublin this issue will always receive the highest priority above every other problem. The Taoiseach might say that he hopes and believes that Mrs Thatcher will accord to it a similar priority. It will require all the courage and ingenuity of the leaders of our two peoples - qualities she has amply demonstrated - to prevail over the appalling legacy of history.
21. As before, nothing should be revealed to the press as to the substance of the conversation. In a few weeks an announcement might be made of agreement on Encounter and of agreement on a formal Summit at the end of the year. This would be worked out by officials.

Anglo-Irish Division

14 June 1983