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PRIME MINISTER

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1. Before you see Garret FitzGerald this weekend I thought you might find it useful to have a report of conversations which Garret FitzGerald and Peter Barry had with me yesterday in the margins of the EC/ASEAN meeting in Dublin.

2. Garret FitzGerald apparently came especially to the reception yesterday evening to ask me to pass on his latest thinking to you. Peter Barry said much the same. They both emphasised their great concern that the Summit should not result in failure or breakdown. FitzGerald said they do want the cooperative search for improvements to be sustained. They do not want simply to have talks for the sake of talks. So if the talks are to continue, they must be aimed at achieving practical progress. FitzGerald said he was deeply concerned at the risk of a deterioration in the security situation.

3. He went on to argue that he believed the answer must lie in steps, if they can be found, to secure an increasing, and not a diminishing, chance for the minority in the North to identify with the structure of Government in the North. The Irish Government, FitzGerald said, clearly recognise the problems that this search poses for us with Unionist opinion. That is why they are prepared to take steps to reassure Unionist opinion which are for them formidably difficult, however much they will be discounted on the Unionist side. FitzGerald several times stressed the importance of yesterday's opinion poll in the Irish Republic which shows a sizeable majority (54%) of Irish opinion ready to recognise the need to set to one side for the foreseeable future the idea that "Irish unity" is the right way forward and to search instead for a solution which could include



changes in the Irish Constitution as well as changes in the structure of government in the North. He took credit - rightly, I think - for what he has been able to do to lower Irish expectations in this respect. FitzGerald of course recognised that the structure of government in the North in the final analysis is a matter for us. But he clearly believes that we are more likely to achieve what we want in enlisting minority support if we are seen to take account of Irish opinion and advice. The crucial point is that the outcome of our joint consideration must enable us together to persuade Hume and the SDLP to take part.

4. FitzGerald also drew attention to the Irish opinion poll majority - wafer thin - in favour of a change in their constitution. If this was to be made secure, they had to be able to commend to Hume, and so to Irish opinion, anything that might emerge by way of constitutional change in the north.

5. And it is there, as we all know, that the real difficulties lie. FitzGerald expressed himself shocked at our "renewed insistence on majority rule". I responded by saying that we had been shocked by their renewed insistence on joint authority and power-sharing. But I added that this division, which was clearly set out in paragraphs 9 and 20 of our Working Paper, had always been the really crucial gap that had to be bridged and still remained. For the rest, I do not think that FitzGerald wants to create difficulties about co-operation on security matters, where some of the practical and political limitations are increasingly part of the common ground.

6. So far I have concentrated on what FitzGerald told me yesterday. In the light of this, I should like to offer some thoughts of my own.



7. Both sides recognise that the nationalist community in the North has been worked into a fundamentally intractable situation, which was not historically of its own choosing and which makes it very difficult for members of that community to identify with the institutions of government and law enforcement in the Province in their present form. The only gainers from this situation are Sinn Fein and the PIRA, whose political advance is beginning to threaten stability on both sides of the border. Unless this advance can be checked, your own fear of a government of radical extremists in Dublin on the Cuban pattern could one day become a reality.

8. I have no illusions that there can be within our political lifetime any quick or simple "solution" to the Irish problem. It goes far back into history and will be with us for many decades yet. The most that we can hope to do is to look for opportunities of edging it a little way towards eventual resolution, making it easier to manage in the meantime - and at the very least, getting it, if we can, off the Cuban road.

9. It seems to me that the current climate of increased realism both North and South of the border, together with the fact that Garret FitzGerald is there and has shown himself ready to lower the level of nationalist expectations, presents us with just such an opportunity. It is too early to judge whether the Irish can be brought to accept limited joint arrangements of the kind we have been prepared to offer them in the exploratory talks between our officials. It will certainly not be easy. And we ourselves must be ready to recognise that we may not yet have found absolutely the right answer. But I believe that arrangements broadly in line with our present proposals, if they were attainable, would make the problem more manageable at least for this generation. I am sure we should not give up the attempt unless and until we are completely convinced that there is simply no realistic hope of reaching agreement with



Garret FitzGerald and his Government. He made it very plain to me that he is prepared to go on devoting great energy to this search. He made very clear how seriously he would regard the consequences of a break-down at this stage. But he argued - and I agree - that if talks were to continue they could only do so on the basis of the continued shared belief that the efforts would be worthwhile.

10. Even if we can get the Irish to recognise the limits of what we can offer (and I know we still have a long way to go on this), we are bound to run into difficulties with the Unionists. Their own case, that Northern Ireland is British and must remain so so long as that is the majority wish, is unanswerable. But it will be an important advance if the Irish are ready to acknowledge - as they appear to be - that there can be no change without majority consent.

11. But if - and it is a big if - we are able to find workable approaches to the problem of government in the North, I believe that your own standing in the country and in the House is high enough to enable us to move forward. We have to recognise, as I think we do, that some temporary increase in the level of violence may result. But this could also be a consequence of doing nothing. And I believe that there would be a general welcome from reasonable people in all parts of the British Isles for firm action by the British Government to introduce new arrangements in Northern Ireland which were clearly designed to promote reconciliation there and were fully compatible with our responsibility to uphold the Union as long as the majority of the population of Northern Ireland wish to remain part of the United Kingdom. This must sound like too simple a conclusion. God knows, I understand the difficulties. But I felt

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it right to let you have my personal impressions ahead of what is bound to be a very anxious but important weekend.

12. I am sending a copy of this minute to Douglas Hurd and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'G. Howe', written in a cursive style.

GEOFFREY HOWE

Foreign and Commonwealth Office  
16 November, 1984

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