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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

4 March 1985

ANGLO-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY BODY

The Prime Minister has considered your Secretary of State's minute of 1 March about the mounting interest in an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Body. She sees a number of problems with this and would like to discuss it at the meeting already arranged on Irish matters on 8 March.

(CHARLES POWELL)

J.A. Daniell, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

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PRIME MINISTER

There is mounting interest in our own party in the idea of an Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Body, and this has reached the stage where I should be grateful for your guidance.

2. Senior backbenchers such as John Biggs-Davison (Chairman of our backbench committee on Northern Ireland) and John Farr, have recently spoken to me in support of the idea of such a parliamentary body. Michael Mates is the Chairman of the All-Party Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Group and therefore has a natural role to play. In an attempt to bring a rather generalised debate down to practicalities I raised this matter at a lunchtime meeting with Michael Mates and other backbench colleagues on 21 February and discussed their ideas with them. They envisaged the body being drawn only from the House of Commons and from the Dail. It would number about 30 to 40. All the main parties would be represented, including the 3 constitutional Northern Ireland parties represented in the House of Commons. It would be able to discuss any matter of mutual concern and would produce reports. It would be established by resolution of the House without formal powers to send for persons or papers, although it might be able to invite, though not compel, Ministers of both Governments to appear before it.

why?

3. I do not know whether there would be any enthusiasm for such a body on the Opposition benches at Westminster. The Unionists at Westminster would be suspicious and would oppose it if its membership were extended to the Northern Ireland Assembly, but this is not envisaged. I do not know how Irish parliamentarians really feel on the subject, and this would obviously have to be explored.

4. The present position is that Michael Mates, as Chairman of the All-Party Anglo-Irish Parliamentary Group, is willing to go to Dublin, perhaps with some colleagues, in order to explore the

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Irish parliamentary reaction to the setting up of such a body. He and the other interested members are however clear that they do not wish even to take this preliminary step without knowing that it has our blessing. We therefore need to decide how we react to the general proposition, which has also been mentioned in our discussion with the Irish.

5. It is easy to find arguments against any new talking-shop, particularly since Irish affairs are already well endowed with such bodies. There is the specific danger that on various matters we might find the three Irish political parties siding with the Opposition parties at Westminster to put our supporters in a minority and produce critical reports. It is right to draw attention to this danger. Nevertheless I believe myself that on balance there would be advantage in creating an Anglo-Irish inter-parliamentary organisation of greater standing and repute than anything which exists at the present. I also see advantage in encouraging our backbenchers who are seriously interested in Irish matters to take an initiative. This would help to show Irish, British and American opinion that we are serious in our efforts to build a solid working relationship with the Republic. It might well be shrewd to take the initiative ourselves rather than to have to respond later to an initiative taken by others.

6. There is obviously much spade-work to be done. Michael Mates could be advised before he goes to Dublin to get in touch with spokesmen of the Opposition parties at Westminster and of course with Jim Molyneaux, Ian Paisley and John Hume. We might also ensure that the Irish Government are aware of the visit. Supporters also need to consider more seriously whether the House of Lords and the Senate in Dublin should be represented.

? 7. The question of finance also needs to be considered as do the terms of reference.

8. All these are necessary practical considerations but they do not I think contradict the argument in favour of allowing Michael Mates to make a preliminary sounding of parliamentary interest in

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Dublin. At the least this would show that our interest in achieving a solid working relationship between Governments is reflected also at the parliamentary level. At the best it could lead to a greater exchange of knowledge between the Parliaments, including of course the elected Westminster representatives of the Northern Ireland parties, which could contribute to softening the edges, still very jagged, of the Irish problem.

9. I am sending copies of this minute to the Lord President, Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Lord Privy Seal and Sir Robert Armstrong.

NB Ward
Private Secretary

for D H

1 March 1985

(Dictated by the Secretary of State
and signed in his absence in Belfast)

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PRIME MINISTER

ANGLO-IRISH PARLIAMENTARY BODY

It seems to me that this body could very easily become a rod to beat the Government's back. At the least it would probably put forward proposals to which the Government would have to react and probably reject. It might be a useful ingredient in some wider move forward in Irish affairs. But to promote it in isolation and without getting anything for it - when we are in a bargaining situation with the Irish Government - seems over-generous.

You have a meeting on Northern Ireland next Friday. Agree to discuss then?

C.D.P.

Yes

N.I. All Kennedy -
and intellectual
matters must be
included from
consideration?
not

1 March 1985