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AMBASSAD NA HEIREANN. LONDAIN



IRISH EMBASSY, LONDON

5/1, 9/23

17, GROSVENOR PLACE,
SW1X 7HR

Telephone: 0171-235 2171

Direct Line: 0171-201 2

Fax: 0171-245 6961

17 June, 1996.

COPY TO:
PST
PSS
MR. P. TEAHON
MR. S. DONLON
MR. T. DALTON

Mr. Seán O hUiginn,
Second Secretary,
Anglo-Irish Division,
Department of Foreign Affairs,
St. Stephen's Green,
DUBLIN 2.

Dear Secretary

Manchester Bomb - Conversation with the Prime Minister

One of the legacies of our membership of the Commonwealth is that the Irish Ambassador is invited by the Prime Minister to join the High Commissioners from Commonwealth countries in the Prime Minister's box on Horse Guards Parade for the annual ceremony of Trooping the Colour to commemorate the Sovereign's official birthday. This year's Trooping celebrated the Queen's 70th birthday and the colour being trooped was that of the 1st Battalion of the Irish Guards. For over an hour on Saturday morning the massed bands of the Guards Division played Irish tunes - the Minstrel Boy, Let Erin Remember, Kelly the Boy from Killane - in the June sunshine while 1000 officers and men performed the colourful ritual in the presence of the Queen.

The Prime Minister was sitting a few seats in front of my wife and me and during the course of the ceremony messages were passed to him. As we rose to go back into No. 10 for the Prime Minister's reception I saw him scanning the guests and heard him say "where is John Holmes?". Inside Downing Street I was called aside and told that the Prime Minister wanted to see me before the reception. He and Holmes told me that there had been a massive explosion in the centre of Manchester, that a large number of people had been injured but that as yet there had been no reports of fatalities. No group had admitted responsibility but from the coded warning they presumed that the bombing was the work of the IRA. A few moments later as I shook his hand on the receiving line I expressed my distress,

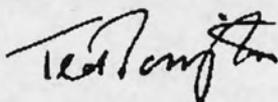
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and what I knew would be the distress of the entire Irish people, at the news. The Prime Minister acknowledged this saying that the bombing was the work of a small fanatical band that had "nothing to do with the Irish people". Raising his voice so that others nearby could hear he said that he was glad that my wife and I were in Downing Street that morning to show that the British and Irish Governments stood together in the fight against terrorism. We were welcome there and would always be. He went on to speculate that the IRA had deliberately chosen the timing of the bombing to coincide with Trooping the Colour and the international focus on Britain because of the European Cup. The bomb itself had been a large one designed to do the maximum amount of damage to people and property. But it should not deflect us from our joint efforts to find a settlement through the current peace process.

After speaking on the phone to the Taoiseach and Paddy Teahon I again spoke to the Prime Minister to convey the Taoiseach's distress and the contents of the statement that the Taoiseach had just issued. The Prime Minister was keen to hear this. He said that they had not yet put out a statement but he had been mulling over in his mind what he himself might say. He was particularly concerned about any reaction against the Irish community in Britain and wondered whether he should refer to this. I suggested that the point could be covered if he referred to the Taoiseach's condemnation of the bombing and to the anger and revulsion of the entire Irish people at the attack. This was subsequently incorporated in the remarks which he made to the tv cameras outside No. 10 and the statement issued by his office (attached).

In further conversation with Holmes, Haslam (the Prime Minister's Press Secretary) and others of the PM's staff it was clear that all shared the Prime Minister's views about the timing of the bombing. Some wondered whether it might be the prelude to a resumption of the ceasefire but the majority view was that this was unlikely. The fear is that it presages the resumption of a wider IRA campaign against British cities. All were concerned about its effects on the talks and felt that it would complicate enormously Mitchell's task in the days ahead.

Yours sincerely,



Ted Barrington
Ambassador