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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

Sir Robert Armstrong

BRITISH-IRISH ASSOCIATION

The Prime Minister has considered your minute of 23 July about the annual meeting of the British-Irish Association due to be held from 13-15 September.

Subject to the views of the Northern Ireland Secretary, the Prime Minister agrees that it would be right to try to persuade organisers of the meeting to postpone it.

I am sending a copy of this minute to the Private Secretaries to the Northern Ireland Secretary and the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary.

(C. D. POWELL)

25 July 1985

Prime Minister

Ref. A085/1973

PRIME MINISTER

Yes mb

Agree - subject to
DH's views - (but we
should try to persuade
the organizers to
cancel this meeting?)

British-Irish Association

CD? 24/7.

The annual meeting of the British-Irish Association is due to be held at Balliol College, Oxford, from Friday 13 to Sunday 15 September.

2. The British-Irish Association is an unofficial body whose Chairman is Mr David Astor. It exists to promote good relations between this country and Ireland, and to provide occasions for discussions between people from this country, from Northern Ireland and from the Republic of Ireland on matters of common interest. The people who come to the meetings include politicians, from both parts of Ireland as well as from Great Britain, journalists, academics and other people with an interest in or concern for Ireland and its problems. Though the body is unofficial, there has always been support for its activities from both Governments, and both Governments are represented at its annual meetings.

3. This year's annual meeting comes at a particularly awkward time in relation to the timetable for your next meeting with Dr FitzGerald and the possible signature of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. As you know, we are looking at the possibility of a date in the second half of September, perhaps only as little as ten days after the annual meeting of the British-Irish Association. The fact that the two Governments have been talking and the possibility that there will be a Summit meeting and Agreement before the end of the year are well established. Given the lively public interest in these matters, I think that we have to assume that speculation both about the contents and timing of an Agreement could have reached a high level of

excitement, as well as a considerable level of accuracy, by the time the British-Irish Association holds its annual meeting.

4. In these circumstances that meeting could become an extremely excitable occasion, with a lot of politicians from Northern Ireland tempted to take up positions which could make a subsequent signature and presentation of an Anglo-Irish Agreement on the lines under discussion very difficult and embarrassing for both Governments. This could particularly be the case, if the meeting includes (as has been proposed) a seminar to discuss sovereignty.

5. At my meeting with Mr Nally yesterday (on other aspects of which I am reporting separately) the two sides discussed the implications of this at some length. There is no easy answer. Invitations to the meeting have gone out, and the British-Irish Association would no doubt be reluctant to cancel or postpone the meeting. If the meeting were to be cancelled or postponed at the request or suggestion of the two Governments, the fact that the suggestion had been made would no doubt become known, and would itself intensify speculation. On the other hand, to hold the meeting could create very serious difficulties for the two Governments and quite possibly diminish the chances of reaching and sustaining an Agreement.

6. On balance, officials considered that it would be right, despite potential embarrassment, to try to persuade the organisers of the British-Irish Association that the best course, in the interests of good relations between Britain and Ireland at this critical juncture would be to cancel or postpone the meeting. This is also the view of the Taoiseach.

7. If you and the Secretaries of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and Northern Ireland (to whom I am sending



copies of this minute) agree, I propose to see Mr David Astor urgently, and to represent to him (as the Irish will also be representing to him) the case for cancellation or postponement.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of the letters 'R' and 'A' in a stylized, cursive script.

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

23 July 1985