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Letter from Joseph P. Walshe to Eamon de Valera (Dublin)  
(Confidential)

DUBLIN, 2 May 1936

Our Political Relations with the British  
A Chat with Sir Harry Batterbee

Sir Harry Batterbee phoned me on Tuesday afternoon from the Adare Hotel and asked me to dine with him in the Shelbourne on Wednesday night so that we might have an opportunity of talking over things in general. I asked him to come and have a meal in my house instead, where we should be much more to ourselves and would be free from disturbances. I met him at the train on Wednesday evening at 7.30, and we talked in my house till about midnight. He said that he was hoping very much that it would be possible to come to some sort of political agreement before long. King Edward, immediately after his accession, had expressed a very strong desire to establish friendly relations with Saorstát Éireann. Indeed he was rather inclined to be impetuous and indiscreet in the matter, and a certain amount of restraint had to be imposed upon him. He had spoken to the Minister for the Dominions at a very early stage and expressed his eagerness to put an end to the quarrel between the two countries. Sir Harry Batterbee himself had been asked to dine with the King for the purpose of giving him all the information he could about the existing situation. Recently Sir Harry Batterbee had a chat with Mr. Baldwin. There were, I gathered, other officials also present at that meeting. Sir H.B. suggested to Mr. Baldwin that he should make a statement setting out that Great Britain would place no obstacle in the way of the establishment of a united Ireland. It was objected that such a statement would appear one-sided and might give serious offence to the Northern Government and to their supporters in England. Ultimately it emerged from the meeting that any statement made would have to refer to the two aspects of the problem, namely, that there should be no coercion of the Six Counties and that any such coercion would be resisted by Great Britain, and in the second place that the establishment of a united Ireland was a matter for the Irish people themselves and that Great Britain would not in any way hinder it.

At this point I urged on Sir Harry Batterbee that the idea of coercing Ulster did not exist except in the imagination of some Tory propagandists. We realised perfectly well what evils followed from coercion, and great care should be taken if any such statement were ever made to let it be clearly seen that in the British belief there was no intention in Saorstát Éireann of attempting any coercion of the Six Counties. He enquired whether there was any

possibility of establishing a five-years' truce in constitutional matters. I said that that, as well as the other subjects of our conversation, would better be discussed between my Minister and his, but I personally thought that it would be useless to think of any truce of that nature before a friendly and generous offer of settlement of the economic struggle had come from them and before the abolition of the office of Governor General. It seemed also to me that a truce could not be arranged until the ports now held by the British had been transferred to us. He replied to this remark that it was quite certain there would be no difficulty about handing over the ports once some political settlement had been made. I pressed him somewhat further on the ports issue, as I thought that the attitude of the British in that relation had never yet been clearly and definitely stated by any official or politician. He had no doubt whatever about the transfer following a political settlement.

Sir H.B. then went on to talk about the need for establishing friendly relations with the Six Counties. I told him that the Six County Government were making an attitude of friendliness on our part exceedingly difficult to adopt.

The jerrymandering of the constituencies against the Nationalists was now being followed by still more disgraceful jerrymandering in the city of Derry. Statements had been made and were being made by the Ministers of the Northern Government against the Catholic population which had no equal in any civilised country. Everybody here wished to put an end to the dreadful evil of sectarianism, and our Government, as he was well aware, did not tolerate any manifestations of sectarianism in the Twenty-six Counties. However, I thought I could take the responsibility of saying that you would be entirely in favour of any and every rapprochement with our Northern fellow-countrymen which could possibly help towards an ultimate United Ireland, but he must realise that the great majority of our people believed that Great Britain herself had far more power to help towards unity than our Government had, and that the fact that she did not exercise that power or did not appear to exercise it left our people the definite impression that she did not want the unity of Ireland to be established. Indeed a great many of our people believed that England regarded the Six Counties as a sort of bridgehead

to be utilised for the re-conquest of the rest of Ireland when it suited her policy to enter upon such a course. I did not myself believe in that theory because it seemed too elementary in the light of modern developments, but Sir Harry Batterbee should remember that the majority of our people believed that Great Britain was the real factor in keeping Ireland divided. I kept repeating during the whole course of this conversation that these proposals or ideas should be put forward by his Minister or the Prime Minister to you personally. I would, of course, repeat our conversation to you. He was going to do likewise with his Minister.

Sir Harry Batterbee attached a good deal of importance to the establishment in Dublin of a British High Commissioner who should keep them constantly informed of the attitude of our Government. On the Governor General question I had said to him that it was our view, and must be the view of all liberal-minded people, that Great Britain had no right whatever to interfere or to dictate what form our system of government should take. On this he said: 'But isn't that a very strong reason for our having an impartial representative in Dublin who will convince our Cabinet that such is your attitude, and no doubt it is a justifiable attitude?' As you will remember, we have discussed this matter of a British High Commissioner in Dublin, and there did not seem to be much reason for encouraging the project, but I am beginning to think that it would be better for us that the British should hear from a properly accredited representative what is happening in this country than from the mischievous interferers who now seem to be their chief sources of information.

[initialled] JPW

#### The British and the Italian Situation

I said to Sir Harry Batterbee that Great Britain seemed to be heading for a war with Italy. She was pursuing a course which could only logically end in a threat of force to the Italian Government. If the Italians did not give way before a threat of force Great Britain's prestige would oblige her to use her Fleet to enforce her demands.

Sir Harry Batterbee replied that there was no danger whatever of war, that the British Government was absolutely determined to prevent war. However, he had to say that if the Italians took complete possession of Abyssinia and appeared to have the intention of remaining there the British would be obliged to talk very strongly to them. They had the Italians bottled up in Abyssinia through their control of the Suez Canal, and if it became necessary they would not hesitate to make use of that position to secure a settlement which would at least save the face of the League of Nations. He did not believe for a single moment that the Italians would attempt to use force against them. He spoke very strongly against the French attitude, which he said was the whole cause of the trouble.

[initialled] JPW