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6 FEB 1987

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From the Private Secretary

Dear Neil,

PRIME MINISTER'S MEETING WITH THE FRIENDS OF THE UNION

The Prime Minister and the Northern Ireland Secretary met a delegation from the Friends of the Union this evening, led by Mr. Ian Gow MP. Mr. Gow was accompanied by Sir John Biggs-Davison MP, Sir Philip Goodhart MP, Sir Patrick Macrory, Mr. Utley and Mr. Burnside.

I do not propose to record the discussion in full. The delegation's views covered a fairly wide spectrum. But in general they made the points set out in the memorandum which Mr. Gow had sent in advance.

Points which the Prime Minister and Northern Ireland Secretary made in reply were:

- the arguments in the memorandum about the implications of the Anglo-Irish Agreement for the status of Northern Ireland were largely pedantic;
- the Government had gone to considerable lengths to avoid some of the pitfalls of earlier agreements such as Sunningdale. For instance these had no provision for a Council of Ireland and no explicit mention of power-sharing;
- it was not clear that the admitted opposition of the unionist community to the Agreement was as monolithic as claimed;
- no-one took seriously the prospect of a united Ireland and harping on Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution was to tilt at a windmill. The unionists were virtually the only people left in the world who took the prospect seriously. With the present economic problems in the South, which were likely to endure, very few nationalists would relish life in the Republic;
- the unionist call for a referendum about the Agreement was a dangerous course. It might stimulate demands for a referendum in the whole of the United Kingdom about the future status of Northern Ireland. People in Great Britain found it increasingly hard to

understand why the two communities in Northern Ireland would not even try to work together;

- another possibility was a Border Poll. A low turn-out might have unpredictable results. But a high vote could be interpreted as endorsement of the Agreement;
- the unionists needed to ask themselves where they were going. They seemed to have no clear policy or direction;
- integration was not a solution. It led straight back to the sort of problems which were at the origin of the present unsatisfactory situation;
- the riposte to the unionists' claim that what they feared was not so much a united Ireland but being governed in consultation with the Republic was that the way to diminish the Irish Government's role was to agree on devolved government. The Government's offer of talks on this remained on the table;
- unionists complained that the nationalists had no incentive to negotiate about devolved government because the Irish government represented their interests. They should put the nationalists to the test by challenging them to get round the table and talk;
- the Government was ready to discuss practical co-operation, particularly in local government. In this context some of the ideas in paragraph 11 of the delegation's memorandum might be followed up.

It was agreed that the delegation would remain in touch with the Northern Ireland Secretary.

After the meeting, the press were told unattributably that the Prime Minister and Northern Ireland Secretary had:

- reaffirmed the Government's commitment to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and recalled the offer to discuss devolution with the unionists and other constitutional parties;
- pointed out that the Agreement posed no threat to the status of Northern Ireland against the wishes of the majority or to the interests of unionists; and
- had agreed on the need to seek out ways to improve practical co-operation.

I am copying this letter to Lyn Parker (Foreign and Commonwealth Office).

Neil Ward, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office.

Yours sincerely
(Signature)
C.D. POWELL

RESTRICTED