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- 9 MAR 1987  
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C.C. PS/Mr. Scott (L&B) - M  
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PS/PUS (L&B) - M  
PS/Mr. Bloomfield - M  
Mr. Stephens - M  
Mr. Chesterton  
Mr. Elliott - M

2. Mr. Spence to see and return pl.  
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EASING THE POLITICAL LOG-JAM

As I have already mentioned briefly to the Secretary of State, officials have been looking afresh at some of the longer term, and some of the shorter term, strategic issues on the political and constitutional front. Government policy is, briefly, to make progress towards an acceptable form of devolved Government if possible, and failing that to maintain direct rule - all in the context of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Political Development Group, which I chair, has commissioned papers on:

- how to maximise the chances of reaching devolved government
- how to improve the sensitivity and acceptability in Northern Ireland of direct rule
- the extent of the need for further changes in local government in Northern Ireland
- the value of the Anglo-Irish Agreement to HMG.

Between them these four papers should give Ministers a basis for deciding what, if any, major initiatives are desirable in Northern Ireland. These papers will all deal with medium to long term policy issues, and the realistic opportunity for developing new policy is likely to be greater after the Northern Ireland political parties have been through the next General Election than it is before that Election. Nevertheless, the decisions Ministers take on these medium to long term issues will echo back, and will tell us what we need to achieve in the short to medium term (up to the Election). For this reason, we are pressing ahead with this work, though it is important that we should spend enough time on the papers to make sure that the thinking in them is sufficiently radical, and reasonably thorough. Balancing these two points, I hope to get further papers to the Secretary of State towards the end of next month.

It does not, however, make sense to suspend all political thinking in the meantime, and we have therefore prepared the attached paper which explores the scope in present circumstances for easing the political log-jam.

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The Secretary of State will not find a great deal that is new in this paper: the first three paragraphs show why the attitudes of the Northern Ireland political parties seem to make it unlikely that any significant political progress will be made this side of the United Kingdom General Election. But there are messages that we should seek to get across to both the majority and the minority community; and there are some additional steps that we could take to drive these messages home. These points for action are summarised in paragraphs 6 (unionists) and 9 (nationalists) of the paper. Even these paragraphs contain relatively little that is new (for instance, two or three of the items in paragraph 6 are already being co-ordinated by Dr. Mawhinney's Presentational Strategy Group), but by linking these issues together, the paper will I hope help to give a clearer sense of the strategy we are following.

In the case of the SDLP and the nationalist community, the thinking of officials has already gone some way beyond that in the attached paper. While I see the need for the measures set out in paragraph 9 of the paper, I also see the need to adopt a more direct approach with the SDLP. Despite their willingness to talk with Government and with other political parties, they have in fact done very little; and despite their support of the Agreement, they have in fact done relatively little to demonstrate that support, or to help HMG sell the Agreement. There is a real risk of the SDLP just floating along. With these points in mind, and bearing in mind that the SDLP represents the constitutional face of nationalism, and is also a party which is willing to talk to Government, I think there is much to be said for approaching the party direct:

- to ensure that they are thinking about the way ahead (we do not want them getting themselves on hooks at the next election) and how to maximise their electoral support at the expense of Sinn Fein
- to explore their attitude to the Agreement, the Conference and the Secretariat in the light of developments (past and anticipated) in the Republic
- to explore with them the scope for selling the achievements of the Agreement, the Conference and the Secretariat more positively to the nationalist population in Northern Ireland, while remaining sensitive to unionist fears
- (in a more exploratory sense) testing the thought that as the Conference exhausts its initial agenda of issues of special concern to nationalists, the Conference will have less business to do, and influence on the processes of Government may increasingly have to come from direct involvement with the regional government in Northern Ireland, rather than in direct involvement through the Conference.

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(at the very least) reaching a reasonable appreciation by the party and by HMG of the current views and needs of each other, and identifying any action that might need to be taken to serve them both.

I assume that the Secretary of State will wish to discuss this proposition before taking any firm view on it. Subject to that, I think, as does PUS, that the approach to the SDLP will (initially at least) have to be made through Mr. Hume, and that it is an approach that would initially be more appropriately conducted at ministerial rather than at official level. Later, however, other senior members of the SDLP may need to be involved (to ensure that what is said genuinely holds water).

Conclusion

The Secretary of State is invited:

- i) to endorse the thrust of paragraph 14 of the attached paper
- ii) to consider whether he would like a discussion with officials about the suggested approach to the SDLP
- iii) to note that longer term papers are also being prepared, and will be submitted as swiftly as possible.

  
I.M. BURNS  
9 March 1987

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EASING THE POLITICAL LOG-JAM

1. The Government's policy, before and since the signing of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, has been in general to seek peace, reconciliation and stability in Northern Ireland; and in particular to seek to establish a form of devolved government in which leaders of both communities can participate with confidence and with the full support of their followers. In the absence of progress towards this goal (and even before the Agreement little progress was being achieved) it is our policy to continue direct rule, ensuring constantly that the administration of the Province is as sensitive as possible to local needs.

2. Substantial progress is not likely to be possible in the short term, either on devolved government or on making direct rule more sensitive. The attitude of Mr. Haughey's administration in the South is an unknown quantity. A general election in the United Kingdom is expected later this year. Unionists in Northern Ireland hope that their campaign against the Agreement will benefit from increased tension in Anglo-Irish relations, for example if Mr. Haughey carries out his threat to renegotiate the Agreement or seeks undertakings from the British which are impossible to give. Some Unionists believe also that a hung parliament at Westminster would give Unionist MPs sufficient leverage to ensure the collapse of the Agreement. For the present at least Unionist political leaders appear therefore to be determined to offer no relaxation in their policy of opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement and refusal to enter dialogue with the Government until the outcome of the UK General Election is known and the attitude of Mr. Haughey is clearer. During this period of uncertainty any major initiative by HMG, for example in proposing an all-party conference under its own or independent Chairmanship, is likely to founder immediately on the rock of Unionist intransigence.

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3. Once the UK election is behind us the scope for constructive action will be enlarged. The Unionists are highly unlikely to have achieved their objective of a controlling voice in the Government's Northern Ireland policy, and the divisions between them which are already evident are likely to deepen; those who are now pressing for a more moderate approach, not excluding some renewal of contact with Government, may become more influential. The Haughey administration will have had time to determine its approach to Northern Ireland questions and may have discarded or shelved its more extreme options. At that time we shall be able to determine more precisely what action can be taken to engage the Northern Ireland parties in dialogue about the governance of the Province and the best manner of enhancing their direct involvement in the processes of Government.

4. The remainder of this paper identifies, within the ambit of existing policy, a variety of steps which we can take in the immediate future so as to create, by the time of the UK election, conditions in which this dialogue may become possible.

#### The Majority Community

5. Our overall purpose in addressing the majority community is to dispel the image, created by Unionist propaganda, that we are ogres in conspiracy with Dublin, and to show (to at least those not committed to integration) that they have something to gain from participation in and with Government. Both in public and in private we can afford to take a rather more aggressive line. We should demolish the more outlandish Unionist allegations, and attack the inconsistency inherent in rejecting democratic institutions while claiming to fight for democracy. It is important to avoid becoming involved in detailed justification of the Agreement, which is unlikely now to persuade Unionists of its merits (although we should make maximum use for example of any identifiable results of improved cross-border security co-operation). Instead we should not hesitate to say that the Agreement represents some shift of influence in favour of the minority, and that this shift has taken place not only on the

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moral grounds of equity and fairness, but on the practical grounds that the support of wider sections of the community is necessary if Northern Ireland is ever to become a more stable place.

6. Against this background, our approach should include the following elements:

- (a) we can continue our very discreet efforts at a senior level to engage the support of influential figures in Northern Ireland in encouraging political dialogue between representatives of the constitutional parties;
- (b) at a lower and most accessible level, we can cultivate and improve our existing contacts with Unionist opinion formers, to encourage what movement there is towards political dialogue, with Government or between the parties. At both levels we should stimulate realistic discussion of the options for devolution, and should point out the need for the Unionists to consider the possibility that there will be no hung Parliament, and a need then for a new Unionist strategy;
- (c) we should lose no opportunity to repeat at all levels and in public the message that Ministers' doors are open for discussion with Unionist leaders, without any association with the Anglo-Irish Agreement. A part of this message is the sensitivity which we are prepared to show in the operations of the Agreement, but we should have regard also to the attitude of the new Irish Government in determining how we express this thought;
- (d) we should encourage any tendency on the part of Unionist politicians to seek discreet meetings with Ministers, with the purpose rather of re-establishing contact than of achieving any particular or specific measure of progress.

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- (e) the programme for Ministerial visits to selected areas of Northern Ireland, to meet the people and show that the normal processes of Government are in operation, should continue and could be intensified. This programme can serve not only to demonstrate that the business of Government is being carried out in a thorough and responsible way, but also in reducing the public's preoccupation with the Anglo-Irish Agreement by encouraging debate on economic and social issues;
- (f) use the administration of transferred matters to provide an alternative focus for public debate - and involve non-political groups in them;
- (g) the suggested programme of speeches and statements by the Secretary of State and his Ministers can hold to underline the reality that Northern Ireland is being properly administered by concerned and involved members of the Government;
- (h) we should try to dispel suspicion of the operations of the Conference and Secretariat, by offering regular briefings on Conference meetings to political leaders, and when opportunity offers by explaining frankly to the media how the Secretariat operates;
- (i) though it is difficult to think of examples, we should consider measures of good government that are likely to be considered valuable by Unionists and we should seek to show an awareness of Unionist needs. (Unionist boycotts of Council Chambers predate the Anglo-Irish Agreement and were prompted by the presence there of Sinn Fein members. There is a firm belief held by many Unionists that the Government does not have the will to deal energetically with the problem of Sinn Fein. So any practical steps which we can take to demonstrate the contrary would help serve this purpose.)

7. It is not possible to assess with any precision the effect which any of these measures might have. Unionist leaders are not in practice likely to accept invitations to meet Ministers, still less to attend formal or informal talks chaired by the Government, within the timescale of this paper. Any discreet contacts which may be arranged are unlikely to produce identifiable results. These measures (6c and d above) have potential value only in demonstrating the accessibility and reasonableness of the Government, with possibly helpful effects over time on opinion in the majority community generally. Similarly, the activities described at 7c and f are designed expressly to emphasise the human and concerned face of the Government, with no immediate ulterior motive. Briefings on the Conference and Secretariat (6g) are unlikely to persuade many that we are not concealing more than we say, but should nevertheless be tried. Action against Sinn Fein (6h), though highly desirable, has difficulties which are explored in other papers. The efforts to encourage dialogue at various levels (6a and b) are most likely to produce positive movement, although we should not deceive ourselves into believing that the results will be dramatic.

#### Minority Community

8. There is rather more prospect of achieving some significant change of attitude on the part of the constitutional Nationalists, and our overall purpose should be to press them more strongly for positive commitment and involvement. The position of the SDLP will be materially affected by the change of administration in the Republic; the relative influence for example of John Hume and Seamus Mallon may change. If Haughey as Taoiseach overplays his hand, the SDLP may see it as to their advantage to show themselves rather more outspoken in their support of the Agreement and even of working within existing Northern Ireland institutions. They may prove to be something of a brake on the Irish administration. Some SDLP members have been helpful in discreet activity behind the scenes. We can and should demonstrate to them that they should as a constitutional party be seen to be adopting a constructive stance sharply distinct from that of Sinn Fein.

and that this can only be to their advantage in electoral terms and generally.

9. Specific elements in our approach to the constitutional Nationalists could include the following:

- (a) we should make more effort to cultivate the leaders of the minority community, not forgetting Roman Catholic church leaders, at all levels including the Ministerial level;
- (b) we should emphasise to them the problems which they face by being seen not to be involved locally in the administration of Northern Ireland. A greater involvement would serve to strengthen the SDLP's position against erosion by Sinn Fein and might demonstrate to Unionists that they had a genuine desire to play a responsible role in running the Province;
- (c) we should stress that the Anglo-Irish Agreement is important not as a step towards a long-term solution, or even merely as a means of security reforms designed to benefit Nationalists, but as the clearest possible demonstration of the Government's recognition of the Nationalist identity. We can ask the SDLP to attempt to get this thought across to the Irish Government, so that they do not ask for more than HMG can deliver through the Conference;
- (d) this approach can be backed up with public statements which emphasise our appreciation of the minority's position;
- (e) in return, we should ask the SDLP to take a less grudging and more forthcoming attitude towards the institutions of Northern Ireland, not only in public statements but also in putting forward credible and powerful statements but also in putting forward credible and powerful candidates for membership of appropriate bodies. The SDLP's failure to put forward candidates for the Police Authority is only one instance of the difficulties of identifying willing

candidates are real), but it has assumed considerable symbolic importance in the absence of any change to the Party's public stance on the RUC more generally; without movement of some kind, the majority community will be very reluctant to accept that Roman Catholics will ever be willing to play their part in the administration of Northern Ireland;

- (f) looking further ahead, we should privately encourage senior members of the SDLP leadership to give some advance consideration to their objectives for participation in a devolved administration and to the means and feasibility of achieving those objectives.

10. The several elements of this approach are complementary. Their effect cannot be assessed separately. The purpose would be to bring the SDLP, in whose interest the Agreement is generally perceived as having been signed, forward to a position of public and open participation in the business of Northern Ireland, so as to deprive the Unionists of the Argument that it is the Nationalists who are inhibiting progress. The SDLP are seen as having a more powerful influence on decisions of Government, through the Irish Government and the Conference; unless they are seen to be offering something in return for this, in the form of a more forthcoming attitude, the Unionists will see no inducement to moderation on their side. Against the background of a Haughey administration, and with a UK election imminent, the SDLP should see the advantages of this course for themselves.

#### Alliance Party

11. Our concern about the attitudes of the Unionists and the SDLP should not lead us to ignore the Alliance Party. Although electorally weak the Party remains important because it can normally be relied on to take a responsible and constructive line, without slavishly supporting the Government's position. It would be damaging, and would reinforce the Unionist case against the Agreement, if the Alliance Party were to withdraw their general

support for it. In order to keep the Alliance Party on side we should be as helpful as possible in response to their requests for information or advice, by continuing with the practice of regular briefings for the Party Leader, and by exploring with them their views on future political development.

#### The Irish Government

12. Our relations with the Irish Government through the Conference and the Secretariat, in particular with the change of administration in Dublin, are the subject of separate papers. However we should not lose sight of the effect of Irish Government statements and contacts on political attitudes in Northern Ireland. Through our contacts with Irish officials we can seek to influence the new administration to avoid giving encouragement to Unionists by casting doubt on the permanence and effectiveness of the Agreement; and to maintain the pressure on the SDLP to take a more positive attitude towards Northern Ireland institutions. Of these, the former is rather more likely to prove achievable than the latter.

#### Conclusion and Summary of Recommendations

13. In preparing the ground for possible initiatives to be taken after the UK election, we need to show ourselves sensitive to the conflicting aspirations of both communities without delivering messages to each which are seen to be inconsistent. We shall not in the short-term be able to change any fundamental perceptions. Our recommendations for this period therefore fall short of radical action, and concentrate largely on presentation.

14. We recommend:

#### Majority community

- a) continued discreet efforts at a senior level to promote political dialogue;
- b) development of contacts with Unionist opinion-formers;
- c) emphasising the willingness of the Prime Minister and Ministers to meet Unionists, and "sensitive operation" of the Agreement;

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- a) developing direct contacts between Ministers and Unionist politicians, if possible;
- e) intensifying the programme of Ministerial visits around the Province;
- f) a programme of speeches and statements;
- g) seeking to demystify the Conference and Secretariat;
- h) steps to control Sinn Fein.

Minority Community

- a) active cultivation of Nationalist leaders;
- b) emphasising the advantages, generally and for the SDLP themselves, of more active involvement;
- c) emphasis on Agreement for itself and not for results it can bring;
- d) statements recognising Nationalist identity;
- e) calls on SDLP to participate actively in Northern Ireland institutions;
- f) encouragement to SDLP leaders to give some thought to possibilities for devolution;
- g) continued contact with Alliance Party to retain their general support for the Agreement.

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