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Confidential

17 July 1979

Rt. Hon. Humphrey Atkins MP
Secretary of State
Northern Ireland Office

Dear Secretary of State

Before receiving your letter of 6 July I had been considering whether I should write to you about the need for a confident relationship between our two Governments and the related question of the balance to be struck in public statements about the detail of security co-operation.

I was perturbed to read in the reports of your statement in the House of Commons on 2 July that you had said that you had come to Dublin to discuss with me and the Minister for Justice the activities of the Provisional IRA throughout the whole island. Such a selective description of the purpose of our meeting is rapidly seized on here and in the North for propoganda and other purposes which do nothing to assist either political progress or our common endeavours generally. In consequence, doubts concerning the purpose and nature of our discussions have been extensively commented on in the press and ~~are~~ the subject of a Parliamentary Question that has been ~~put down for answer by me.~~ *VERB* *WHICH I ANSWERED IN THE DAIL ON 17 JULY*

The effect of an excessive emphasis on security questions in the presentation of the relations between our two Governments is not so much to reassure as to enable those in Northern Ireland who are hostile to reconciliation between the two communities there and between the two parts of Ireland to exacerbate relations within the island and the sense of insecurity of those who feel themselves under attack. Our immediate aim must be to encourage the rebuilding of confidence between the two communities and we would suggest that this can best be done within a system of shared responsibility for devolved government in Northern Ireland. I fully share your view of the advantage of quiet and patient, persistent and determined talking with the Northern political parties. This is certainly an essential step and I would not wish to prejudge how far this course will take you. But the political leaders

on both sides in the North must be clear on the direction at which British Government policy is aiming, both in order to encourage those who will support moderate reasonable policy and to disabuse any who might think that extreme demands are attainable.

For our part we shall continue to support the efforts of your Government, to the extent we can, so long as we are confident that an effort to achieve progress is being maintained. You are also, I know, in no doubt of our continuing commitment in the security area. However our joint efforts are not helped by statements such as that which you are reported to have made on television recently which implied that the difficulty in mastering the IRA within Northern Ireland derived from the use of this jurisdiction for training, reorganising and planning. The effect of this sort of comment is to sow distrust in Northern Ireland of the role of our Government, an effect which is indeed heightened by much of the official briefing which emanates from the British Army. All in all, such comments contribute neither to good relations between the two police forces nor to the friendly and confident relations between the two Governments to which you referred in your letter. I would suggest that the reassurance to which you also referred would result more readily from the occasional unambiguous recognition, in broad terms rather than in detail, of the efforts and effectiveness of the Irish Government's security contribution.

I trust that the damage that has been done to our relations since we last met can be overcome. I remain prepared to meet you again at any mutually convenient date to thrash these problems out.

Yours sincerely

Michael O'Kennedy
Minister for Foreign Affairs