

Ireland

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

Ref. A09455

PRIME MINISTER

Re. G.M.
95

Northern Ireland

Note
P. 11. 11.

Northern Ireland is likely to become a more urgent political problem following the Election than it has been for many months past. Though the previous Administration tried to make progress with the Northern Ireland Parties with its so-called "framework" proposals, in practice everybody was marking time in the months before the Election. Both the Unionists and the SDLP believed that they stood to gain more after the Election than before, and so neither was prepared to move off its entrenched positions. The Unionists want to return to full devolved government of the pre-1972 Stormont kind. They are firmly opposed to any kind of power-sharing in government with the minority. The SDLP seek to participate in the government of Northern Ireland and they will resist any moves which, in their view, will make it more difficult for them to achieve their long-term aim of a united Ireland. The impression has built up in Northern Ireland that the period of political inactivity before the Election was a prelude to some new initiative by an incoming Government with the authority of a fresh mandate.

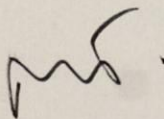
2. Expectations are also high in Dublin and the United States. The Irish Republic Government have in general been reasonably helpful to us over Northern Ireland in the recent past, but they are under constant pressure to take a tougher, more nationalist line. One source of that pressure is from the Irish lobby in the United States. The United States Government come under similar pressure from the same direction. The approach of election year in the United States will add to this pressure; recent speeches by Speaker O'Neill and Governor Carey are a foretaste. So far they too have been helpful in their approach to Northern Ireland. But if we are not seen to be taking some early and positive steps to bring about some progress, it will be increasingly difficult for both the Irish and American Governments not to become more critical in private and in public. This would encourage the SDLP to make more extreme demands; and the Unionists would take fright and in turn become even less disposed to compromise.

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

3. There is therefore a clear need for the Government to move into a higher gear. But however high the expectations of a new approach by the Government may be, the reality is that the room for manoeuvre is very tightly constrained. The Northern Ireland Office do not have a new blueprint ready to put to the Parties which is likely to solve everything. They have a number of ideas. Some of these are similar to initiatives that have been tried before and failed: others are more imaginative but more risky, and we may well have to consider these. In this situation the role of the person you choose as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will be crucial. There will be a short period after he takes office when he will have a stock of political credit. If we are to make any progress, he must use this to the best advantage before the sheer pressure of events compromises him in the eyes of one side or the other.

4. I think this means that the Secretary of State should make rapid contact with the Parties and with the Irish Government. He will need to be firm on law and order but to gain the confidence of both communities: this means that he must be seen to be open-minded and without bias in one direction or the other, while at the same time capable of having ideas of his own. He will need to be highly active in private but ready, at least initially, to take a restrained line in public. If he succeeds in getting things off the ground, he will have to handle complex and possibly protracted negotiations.

5. When he has completed his initial round of contacts with the parties, the Secretary of State will need to seek your approval for the way he proposes to try to make progress since it will be essential for him to have a clear objective and to be seen to have the full backing of the Cabinet. Because of the nature of the problem he will necessarily have to operate rather more on his own than most Ministers do; and experience shows that Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland can easily get out of touch with their colleagues.


John Hunt

2nd May 1979