

CONFIDENTIAL



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Principal Private Secretary

29 May 1980

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Dear John,

NORTHERN IRELAND: PROPOSALS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

The Prime Minister has seen the Home Secretary's minute of 28 May 1980 reporting on certain points which arose in MISC 24's discussion on 22 May of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland's proposals for further discussion. She does not wish to settle at once the question of the publication date for the Government's proposals and she would prefer to reach a decision on this issue at the meeting of OD which is being arranged for 10 June.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Private Secretaries to the other members of MISC 24, to Godfrey Robson (Scottish Office), Robin Birch (Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's Office) and David Wright (Cabinet Office). I am also sending a copy of my letter and of the Home Secretary's minute to Murdo Maclean (Chief Whip's Office).

Yours etc.

John Williams.

J.A. Chilcot, Esq.,
Home Office.

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PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND: PROPOSALS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

I attach a minute from the Home Secretary reporting a discussion in MISC 24 on the publication date for Mr. Atkins' proposals for further discussion. The choice is between the end of June, which hitherto had been the preferred date, and the end of July. MISC 24, on balance, came down in favour of the later date.

Ken Stowe rang me yesterday about the MISC 24 discussion. It seems that Mr. Atkins' preference for a July publication date took everyone by surprise: until the meeting he had favoured publication in June. Ken Stowe has pointed out that there is one argument in favour of publishing in June which is not mentioned in Mr. Whitelaw's minute. This is that if we go for the later date, it will mean that we shall have the virtually final version of the discussion paper on our hands for about six weeks before it is published, and this means that it will almost certainly be leaked in the interval. If that happens, Ken Stowe fears that those political parties in Northern Ireland who are so disposed will have ample opportunity to discredit the Government's proposals before they have been officially made public. He believes that this points to publishing in June, as originally intended.

Do you want to take a view now on the publication date, or would you prefer to discuss the issue at the meeting of OD on 10 June and take a decision then?

If you are content to decide now, do you prefer June or July?

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Will take a view at the meeting. Mr. Jones

JWS.

I have read the paper (and that is not let fully) contents very sorry and I think they will have a very damage, well you would many of them not.



PRIME MINISTER

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MISC 24 were in two minds over publication date for the proposals. On balance, they preferred late July, but recognised case for June. Do you have a preference?

NORTHERN IRELAND: PROPOSALS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

We had a meeting of MISC 24 on 22 May to consider Humphrey Atkins' "proposals for further discussion". Although we generally agreed with these in relation to their substance, tone and length, we had great difficulty in deciding what would be the best publication date. The purpose of this minute is to make you aware of this problem in case you wish to express a view at this stage.

The choice lies between publishing the proposals next month, which in practice means about 23/24 June, or delaying publication until after the Renewal Debate which must be held before the present powers expire on 16 July, i.e. publication not before the latter part of July.

The arguments in favour of a later publication date mainly relate to the fact that if the proposals are published before the Renewal Debate they will form the main subject of discussion during that debate. But there will have been insufficient time for either digestion of their real meaning or further private negotiation. There will, therefore, be a risk that the representatives of the Northern Irish political parties in the House will take up entrenched attitudes in regard to the proposals which will make it very difficult to achieve a settlement.

The main argument in favour of the earlier publication date, i.e. by the last week in June, relates to the fact that there is a risk with a later publication date that there will be such a loss of political momentum that the idea may gain circulation that we simply do not know what to do. It may also be argued that your discussions with Mr. Haughey on 21 May have caused us to go back to the drawing board. He could hardly be relied on to disavow this kind of speculation. Furthermore, a publication date in the latter part of July would coincide with the marching season in Northern

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Ireland, which is a particularly bad time of year to attempt to engage in rational political processes in that part of the world.

Thus the choice is a difficult one. On balance MISC 24 felt that the later publication date was probably to be preferred, but we were very clearly aware of the difficulties attaching to both courses of action. In any case Humphrey Atkins would like OD to consider his draft proposals as soon as possible and I believe that we ought to do this at our meeting which is being proposed for 10 June: as delay would close the option for early publication. At that occasion, apart from the substance of the proposals we can reach a final view on the publication date unless you feel this is an issue which ought to be settled at once.

At our MISC 24 meeting we also considered whether the proposed Northern Ireland Assembly ought to be given legislative powers in view of the possible difficulties this might create elsewhere, notably in Scotland. Notwithstanding this possible difficulty, we concluded that the clear balance of advantage particularly in terms of securing compliance from the minority community lay in conferring some legislative powers on the new Assembly. Again almost any special arrangement for Northern Ireland might be held to offer precedents for Scotland and, paradoxically, arrangements confined to the devolving of executive tasks, so offering Northern Ireland least, might prove the most tempting to the Scottish Nationalists. It was our view that it has become sufficiently well established over the last 50 years that Northern Ireland is different to the rest of the United Kingdom for us to be able to live with this potential difficulty.

I am sending copies of this minute to the members of MISC 24, to the Secretary of State for Scotland, to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster in view of the implications for the Parliamentary timetable of the proposed publication date of Humphrey Atkins' proposals, and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

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28 May 1980

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