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Ref. A09934

PRIME MINISTER

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Northern Ireland

(OD(79) 12, 13, 14 and 15)

This will be an important discussion because

- (i) there has not been a collective discussion of Northern Ireland since the Government was formed;
- (ii) there is at the present time an underlying and rather worrying difference of view between the Northern Ireland Office and the Ministry of Defence about the handling of the security situation. This may, or may not, come to the surface at tomorrow's meeting, but in any case I think you ought to be aware of it. It is spelt out in paragraph 3 below and is also relevant to the suggested conclusions in paragraph 7 below.

2. For both these reasons it is desirable that the Committee's conclusions should be as clear as possible about the course which Ministers wish to follow.

3. The Ministry of Defence are concerned that, while the situation on the streets has improved, the hard core of the PIRA has become more professional.

They would like to see tougher security measures but accept that these largely depend upon cross-Border co-operation from the Dublin Government. Accordingly they would like to see a political "initiative" which would secure this support. As a first step they want an interdepartmental study, chaired by the Cabinet Office, of the cross-Border problem. Some people in the MOD would also like to see the appointment of a Resident Minister in Belfast and a Director of Operations. The Northern Ireland Office, on the other hand, tend to see these suggestions as undeserved criticism from soldiers who would like to be let off the leash. More substantively, while they are anxious to make progress, they doubt whether the grounds exist at present for a major political initiative and also whether, even if such grounds existed, there is very much more that the Dublin Government could do, unless the Gardai is much improved, on their side of the Border.

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4. Having discussed the matter fully with both Departments (I chair the Official Committee on Northern Ireland) I do not think that there is as much between them as some senior officials and generals think. It is however most undesirable for there to be misunderstandings over the cross-Border problem between the NIO and the MOD: and if the way to defuse this is a small working party chaired by the Cabinet Office I think we could take this on provided this is what OD wants. I do not however think you need float the idea unless Mr. Pym himself presses for it (as he is being briefed to do). If however he goes further and suggests the appointment of a Resident Minister in Belfast or a Director of Operations (and he has already canvassed both with Mr. Atkins) I think you ought either to kill both ideas or say that you will reflect on them yourself (they are certainly not suitable for remission to a normal interdepartmental committee). Over the years many of us have felt that the case for a Resident Minister in Belfast is a strong one, but it has always come up against the stumbling block that the Secretary of State of the day feels that his support must lie at Westminster and that he has perforce to commute: I doubt whether Mr. Atkins will feel any differently. The appointment of a Director of Operations would raise great difficulties vis-a-vis the RUC and would be a major reversal of the present policy of giving "primacy to the police".

HANDLING

5. I suggest that you ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to introduce all his papers together since the first three are inter-connected and there is little which requires discussing on the economic side.

6. The essential questions then are:-

- (a) Do Mr. Atkins's general impressions of the present situation in Northern Ireland accord with those of his colleagues? This will almost certainly prompt Mr. Pym to say that he was profoundly depressed by his recent visit to Belfast, and could lead straight in to a general discussion of the politico/security situation.
- (b) Is the strategy (outlined in paragraphs 5-7 of OD(79) 13) of patient and determined exploration with the political leaders in Northern Ireland going to be regarded as enough of a new political initiative to contain the situation? Mr. Atkins will probably say that none of the political leaders

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are looking for an initiative at present. But how much time have we got? Is Northern Ireland likely to become a major factor in the United States elections? How much time will the Dublin Government give Mr. Atkins before they start stirring up trouble? Will there be a problem over Army morale unless we are seen to be doing something? On this same question of whether time is working for or against us, how much significance should be attached to Paisley's sweeping victory in the recent Euro-elections? And to rumours that Mr. Lynch may be contemplating retirement? An unprepared initiative which misfires could do great damage: but delay could lead to the development of more extreme views on both North and South of the Border.

- (c) Despite the big drop in civilian casualties since 1973 has the PIRA threat really diminished? Mr. Atkins may say yes: but Mr. Pym is likely to take the view that, although the casualties have diminished in scale, the PIRA threat, particularly in the Border area, has actually grown in terms of sophistication and our ability to cope with it, even though its popular base has shrunk. Is there more we can do on our own account to improve cross-Border security? Or does it depend on help from the Dublin Government? What are the prospects of getting more from them?
- (d) Are the present force levels in Northern Ireland correct? Force levels need to be adjusted both in relation to the demands of the task in Northern Ireland and of more general defence commitments. Does the machinery for making this judgment work satisfactorily?

CONCLUSIONS

7. The Committee seem likely to agree that there is no scope for a major political initiative at the present time: and that Mr. Atkins should continue his talks with the main political leaders and work out specific proposals to be put forward at the right moment. Time may not however be on our side, and you may want the Committee to consider Northern Ireland again after the Summer Recess. In the meantime every effort should be made to ensure that our policies are properly understood in the United States.

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8. Opinions may be divided on cross-Border security - in which case you could endorse the general policy on law and order but ask that officials, under Cabinet Office chairmanship, should review the security and intelligence arrangements relating to cross-Border security and report to OD.

*JH*

JOHN HUNT

9th July, 1979