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(Ireland), March 80,
visits by the Taoiseach.



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Prime Minister

PRIME MINISTER

Yes

Agree procedure on page 2?
(Sep minute on invitation to R. Haughey)

THE NORTHERN IRELAND CONFERENCE

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The Ministerial Group on policy on Northern Ireland which you agreed should be established last October has just met under my Chairmanship to consider progress in the Northern Ireland Conference and agree on the way ahead. The purpose of this minute is to let you know our conclusions.

It is our view that the Conference which has now adjourned, has made useful progress. Although the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) have not taken part, the three parties who have attended have got to know each other's points of view better, and have reached a good working relationship with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. As he has already reported to the Cabinet, its major achievement is that the Government and the three political parties now know where possible areas of agreement lie, where there may be scope for compromise and where each party's position is immovable. Furthermore they have come to a better understanding of the Government's sincerity and determination to achieve a political solution in Northern Ireland. There is a general expectation that the next move lies with the Government when the Conference reconvenes.

But the Conference has made no real progress towards resolving the power-sharing dilemma. This is the central issue which has got to be settled or got round by one means or another before a political solution can be achieved. The future is not entirely without promise. Although the Conference has formally adjourned, the private bilateral talks with the parties which were being conducted in parallel with the formal business, will continue. These private talks have given the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland a much clearer view than hitherto of what the political parties do not want, which includes an extension of local government on the English pattern. They are all quite clear that they want some form of devolution.

/On procedure

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On procedure we consider that the next step should be for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to produce a draft White Paper which will make some rather more specific proposals than those in the original consultative document which formed the working paper for the Conference. I propose that this should be considered by my group towards the end of April, circulated for the approval of the Cabinet and published by mid May.

This White Paper would provide a basis for further bilateral discussion with all the main parties including the UUP leading perhaps to a reconvened Conference meeting in London. There might also during this stage be a Parliamentary debate on the matter. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would then aim before the Summer Recess to put proposals to the Cabinet in the light of this further Conference on which conclusions would be reached about content and practicalities of legislation to take place early in the next Session of Parliament, with an appropriate reference to it in The Queen's Speech.

This is obviously an ambitious timetable particularly when the solution of the central problem is still in doubt. But there seems to us to be every advantage in keeping up the pressure on the four political parties. They are unlikely to agree to our eventual proposals with enthusiasm and we shall not in any case be able to override their total opposition. But we may be able to obtain their reluctant acquiescence to proposals which they see command the agreement of the other political parties and a degree of popular support in Ireland.

If we do not maintain the pressure, we are likely to be pressed ourselves, particularly from abroad. Mr Haughey has already expressed a wish to see you as soon as possible to discuss a wide range of subjects including Northern Ireland. We do not consider that you will wish to discuss these matters with him in the margins of

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the postponed European Council meeting and we believe that the balance of advantage lies, in inviting him to London to have talks with you as soon as your diary allows after Easter. We are not fortunately being subjected to any pressure from the United States at the present moment but this situation may change if we cannot demonstrate some signs of progress. This is another argument in favour of an early invitation to Mr Haughey.

I would be grateful for your agreement to the procedure proposed in this minute of which copies go to the Lord Chancellor, Lord Privy Seal, Secretary of State for Defence, and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. I am also sending copies to members of OD for their information.

W.H.W.

31 March

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