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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
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7 March 1980

f.a. Hunt 7/3

Dear Michael,

NORTHERN IRELAND CONFERENCE: FIFTH AND SIXTH WEEKS' SESSIONS
(18 and 27/29 FEBRUARY, AND 3/5 MARCH 1980)

Roy Harrington's letter of 8 February set out developments during the sessions in the fourth week of the Conference. Since then the Conference has met for one isolated day in mid-February, and gone on to a block of 9 sessions over a period of 6 working days. During those sessions it has completed the long spell of presentation, with discussion, by each party in turn of its proposals regarding the modus operandi of a devolved administration (item 6 on the Agenda). We then had a short period of discussion of the place of committees in a devolved administration (item 7), to the extent that this had not been discussed under item 6. There then began under the heading of item 8 - role of minorities - a discussion which to a considerable extent traversed again the ground covered under items 6 and 7. This discussion is still not quite completed.

This series of discussions of interlocking matters connected with the main theme of the Conference - how to give the minority community a positive part in a devolved administration - has made the positions of the three parties clearer to each other and to us. But it has not produced any sense of a readiness to explore middle ground (if indeed there is middle ground to explore). A wide gap divides the UDUP with their insistence on the principle of majority rule, with opportunities for participation by the minority in a system of committees where their influence would be limited and majority rule would apply, from the SDLP and Alliance party who each, in their different ways, insist on a devolved administration in which power is shared among all the participating parties. Though different points have been made in many different ways, they can all be seen as variations on that theme.

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There are a number of items on the Agenda yet to be discussed, some of them quite substantial - for example financial arrangements; how to test the acceptability of proposals for devolved administration; and the question of its permanence. Also, there are aspects of earlier items on the Agenda which need to be gone over again. There has been the usual difficulty in fixing dates for meetings, and the only days that we have been able to agree between now and Easter are 19, 21 and 31 March. So we look like being some way from finishing business by Easter. We hope to use some of this vacant time to explore bilaterally with the parties whether they have a greater readiness to compromise, or at least to accept something less than their full demands, than they have displayed at the Conference table.

There has been some progress with the "parallel talks" on matters outside the scope of, but linked with, the subject matter of the Conference, which were agreed to at the beginning of the Conference when the scope of the Agenda was being discussed. There have been two meetings with the SDLP at which they have presented their rather critical views on the security situation and how it is handled. There is to be a further meeting with them next week on economic matters (on which they have already published one paper criticising the Government's record), and there will also be an initial meeting with the Alliance party on security. The DUP rejected the invitation to take part in these discussions.

A number of exchanges during the Sessions just ended underlined the feelings of anxiety and resentment on the part of the three parties taking part about the Official Unionist Party. These were sparked off by local Press reports that the Conference would shortly be adjourned so that there could be bilateral talks with the OUP. The parties at the Conference are concerned lest the OUP, having spurned the opportunity of taking part in the Conference and submitting their ideas to cross examination, should now be given a privileged position in passing judgement on the outcome of the Conference. The Secretary of State gave them an assurance that, while it was necessary for him to maintain contact with the OUP as with other political groups in Northern Ireland, he had no intention of discussing Conference matters with them while the Conference was sitting, and the OUP had been given no promises.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Private Secretaries to other OD Members and to David Wright (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely
Mike Hopkins
M W HOPKINS

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