

CONFIDENTIAL
From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

Ireland



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
GREAT GEORGE STREET,
LONDON SW1P 3AJ

Lg. Paul

Prime Minister

*Mr Atkin mentions this at
the briefing meeting this afternoon*

13 December 1979

ans.

*Paul
13/12/79*

Michael Alexander Esq
10 Downing Street
London SW1

Dear Michael,

As you know, the Secretary of State has had two meetings with John Hume, leader of the SDLP, to try to get him to agree that his party should be represented at the conference on the government of Northern Ireland.

The SDLP needed to show that they had won something to justify their change of mind if they decided to attend; but any changes in the terms of the conference would, as Dr Paisley has made clear, cause the DUP to pull out. Navigating with care between Scylla and Charybdis, the Secretary of State has prepared, and John Hume has provisionally accepted, the paper which I enclose as a statement of the basis on which the SDLP would attend the conference. The SDLP's acceptance is provisional only in the sense that the paper will not be formally agreed by both sides until John Hume comes to see the Secretary of State in Belfast next Saturday morning, after which he will tell his party executive and both sides will publish the paper.

The Secretary of State has given an indication to Dr Paisley of what such a paper might contain. He will be considering whether anything more needs to be done to avoid trouble on the DUP side, which of course could still happen. But all being well, this agreement should mean that an announcement of the SDLP's willingness to attend the conference would be made next Saturday afternoon, just before the Prime Minister goes to the United States. It is essential that it be published as soon as it is formally agreed: leaks and glosses on the text would cause trouble.

At the present stage I am copying this letter and the enclosure only to George Walden and Martin Vile. My Secretary of State will report to his OD colleagues after the weekend when the position will be more definite.

Yours ever,

R A Harrington

R A HARRINGTON

CONFIDENTIAL

13 DEC 1979



(Draft press statement)

At a meeting on 10 December the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Mr John Hume of the SDLP discussed the working paper (Cmnd 7763) which is the basis for the proposed conference. The following points were agreed:-

1. The Secretary of State's invitation to Conference participants in his speech in the House of Commons on 29 November (Hansard, cols 1507 - 8) to put in papers to the Conference means that the SDLP will be free to put forward papers containing their own proposals.
2. The Secretary of State as Chairman would invite those present to introduce their own papers orally. It will be for the Conference as a whole to consider how particular points in such papers should be pursued.
3. The Conference is not an end in itself, but is a means of identifying the "highest possible level of agreement" on the transfer of responsibility for certain functions to locally elected representatives. Even after such a transfer, further political development remains possible, depending always upon the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. The Government envisage the conference as the first step in a developing process of agreement between the people of Northern Ireland. Such a possibility is fully consistent with Section 1 of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973, which means not only that Northern Ireland will remain a part of the UK as long as a majority of Northern Ireland inhabitants so wish, but also that if such a majority indicated a wish for some change in their constitutional status, Her Majesty's Government would not stand in the way of such a change.
4. As regards the "Irish dimension", the Conference (and in due course any elected body) would be able to discuss the relationship between an elected representative body in Northern Ireland and the Authorities of the Republic on all matters over which the former exercised responsibility.
5. The Working Paper (Cmnd 7763) makes it clear that, although there is no serious prospect of agreement on a return to the system of government which obtained in the first five months of 1974, arrangements to take account of the interests of the minority by a sharing of the exercise of governmental powers will be on the table for discussion by the Conference, as is evidenced by a number of references to such arrangements in the Working Paper itself.
6. The Secretary of State will be willing on request, and quite apart from the Conference, to have separate meetings with the parties represented at the Conference on wider issues.