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From THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

Ireland



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
GREAT GEORGE STREET,
LONDON SW1P 3AJ

Michael Alexander Esq
10 Downing Street
London
SW1

31st January 1980

Dear Michael,

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Nunt 20/11*

Northern Ireland Conference

This letter is to report progress at the third week's sessions of the Conference, which consisted of 5 half-day sessions on 28-30 January.

The Conference has now reached the heart of the matter: the role to be assigned to the minority community in a devolved administration. Most of the time has been devoted to this subject, and there is still some way to go. Discussion has been serious and detailed.

Three positions have emerged:

- (i) The Alliance party favour a partnership administration based upon a system of committees, with membership and chairmanships in proportion to representation in the elected Assembly.
- (ii) The SDLP favour a partnership administration based on a power-sharing cabinet-type executive on the 1973/74 model. They are also keen on some kind of UK/Irish guarantee of the integrity of such an administration.
- (iii) The DUP want cabinet-style majority rule; there would be some safeguards for the minority, but they have not so far set out what these might be.

So far the Alliance proposal has been the most fully expanded, and has been subjected to detailed examination by the Conference. The intention is that, when this examination has been completed, there will be a corresponding examination of the proposals of the other 2 parties. Some restiveness is developing over the reluctance of the DUP to show their hand, and over suggestions being made in leaks to the media that they will not be willing to do so unless the SDLP concede the principle of majority rule.

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The 2 main parties remain a long way apart, and the prospects of a high level of agreement between them cannot at present be rated as good. Nevertheless, and despite some skirmishing in the media (despite the 'self-denying ordinance'), they seem to want to keep the Conference going. There is a good deal more "Working Paper" ground to cover, and it could take some time yet - it would be a mistake, at least at the present stage, to try to force the pace.

After next Monday and Tuesday (4/5 February) there are substantial gaps in the Conference programme because of other commitments (European Parliament in particular). This is a pity but seems inescapable.

The first of the "wider talks" offered (to meet the SDLP request) took place on Wednesday 30 January. This first one was on security matters, with the SDLP alone. Further sessions seem likely, on this and other topics; the Alliance party are considering the invitation and may join in the talks at the next stage. The other parties (DUP and UUP) are not willing to join in.

My Secretary of State hopes his colleagues in OD Committee, to whose Private Secretaries this letter is copied, will find this information useful. It remains confidential, for the reasons emphasised in my previous letters on this subject.

Yours ever,
R. A. Harrington

R. A. Harrington

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