

CONFIDENTIAL

From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

Ireland. 2.



NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
GREAT GEORGE STREET,
LONDON SW1P 3AJ

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Nick Sanders Esq
10 Downing Street
London SW1

21 August 1980

Prime Minister

To see the enclosed Irish press cutting, illustrating the speculation which Clive discussed with you earlier in the month - I attach the letter in which he reported your response.

Dear Nick

I mentioned to you on the 'phone, in the context of Roy Harrington's letter of 30 July and Clive Whitmore's reply of 5 August, an article in last Saturday's "Irish Times". I thought you might find it helpful to see the article concerned.

MP 26/8

The Prime Minister's intended examination of the relationship between the UK and the Republic was of course mentioned in Clive's letter. (McKittrick, as you will see, claims she promised specifically to study Mr Haughey's suggestion for "a completely new relationship".) You should know that the Prime Minister's concern, as set out in Clive's letter, is being studied by the FCO and ourselves, together with the Cabinet Office.

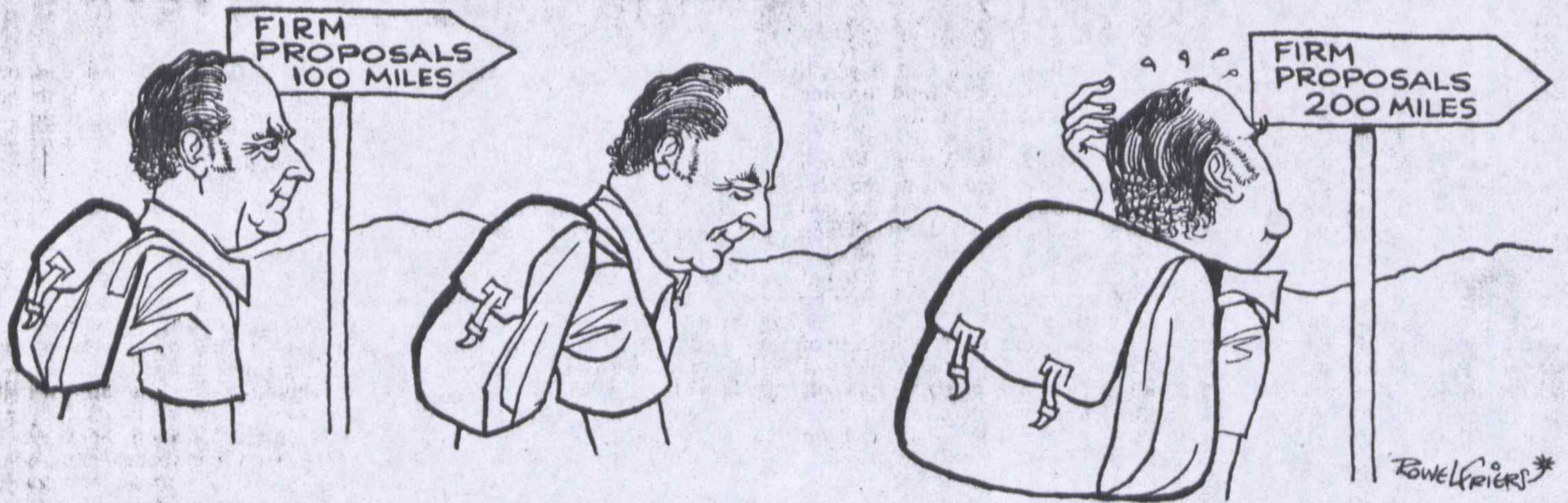
Yours sincerely
Mike Stephens
M W HOPKINS

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NORTHERN NOTEBOOK

by DAVID MCKITTRICK



Atkins prospect of even minimal agreement receding

I HAVE here, on a grubby bit of paper, the evidence of a wager made with an SDLP politician last autumn. He bet me £20 that an administrative assembly would be in operation in Northern Ireland by May 1980. He was wrong: we have seen no such assembly (nor, incidentally, have I seen the £20).

When the bet was laid, there was an outside chance that he would win it. The British were pushing hard, big plans were being made, and it really seemed that a real drive was on to bash the local politicians' heads together and put them to work. But, somewhere along the way, things got complicated, confused. And, by now, Humphrey Atkins must feel that the prospect of even minimal agreement on anything important is receding rather than coming closer.

Atkins's hopes were based on the private and public utterances of two men — Ian Paisley and Gerry Fitt. Paisley had been given a new confidence by his big European vote. Atkins hoped he would now feel strong enough to compromise. Fitt was then at the head of the SDLP, and, privately, he was saying what he later said in public — that an Irish dimension wasn't essential, nor was full power-sharing.

Atkins misjudged both men, though it took him a long time to realise it. He was dismayed when Fitt parted company with the SDLP. But, he still toyed with the idea of the DUP leader as Prime Minister in a new assembly.

At a private gathering last spring, just after the end of his conference, he said he was almost ready to announce a new scheme which he thought most people would support. A critic of

Paisley's asked if he thought Paisley would ever accept Catholics in government. Atkins pondered, then replied: "I don't think Paisley actually hates Catholics, do you? He seems to get on quite well with John Hume."

* * *

The Secretary of State now realises that agreement — on any scale — isn't going to come as easily as he thought. Since the spring, Northern Ireland Office people had said, privately, that Queen Elizabeth's speech, which opens the new session of the British Parliament in November, would contain legislative proposals for a new assembly. Now, suddenly, they've begun to say that November was only a kind of target date, not a firm commitment.

With everything being pushed back, the goal of holding elections to a new assembly in the springtime has also been shelved. This postponement will have one useful side-effect at least — the elections to provide a valuable indication of party strengths. It was the council elections of 1977 which decimated the minor parties and established that only four parties — Official Unionist, SDLP, DUP and Alliance — had significant support. This time, the key question will be the relative strengths of Paisley and the Official Unionists.

Meantime, Atkins is about to go on his holidays. Like the rest of us, he will be waiting to see what frame of mind his Prime Minister is in when she comes back. It's not clear whether Atkins knows this, or not, but it is now known that Margaret Thatcher promised Charlie Haughey to spend

the summer thinking about his suggestion for a completely new relationship between these islands.

Nor does anybody know if she's going to 'do a Gladstone' and become an Irish Nationalist. Almost certainly she isn't. But, the fact that all previous policy decisions could suddenly be rendered inoperative has helped create an air of uncertainty. That's why the Stormont Castle people are always talking about keeping all options open. Some day, they'll have to choose one of the options but — after a year-and-a-half of Tory rule — there's no real indication of when that will be.

* * *

On the security front, this hasn't been too bad a year for the authorities. Loyalist paramilitary groups have occasionally been active, but in a way which has been both more limited and more selective than their record in previous years. The Provisionals are still on the go, of course, but their activities are clearly directed against easy targets.

Almost all the deaths caused by the Provisionals are those of members of the security forces, or prison warders. They are killed in two ways — they are blown up, on duty, by radio-controlled bombs, or they are killed while off-duty by hit-and-run assassins. Both systems involve little risk to the killers.

This pattern is interpreted in some quarters as a sign that the Provos' capabilities have been considerably reduced. People are still being killed, the argument runs, but the Provos can only manage soft targets now.

The RUC and the Ulster Defence

Regiment have managed progressively to take over more and more security responsibilities from the British Army. The police coped with the traditional Bogside August 12th riot this week, while in Belfast the UDR is now back in areas like the Short Strand and Bawnmore Estate — places where their presence would have been unthinkable just a few years ago.

But, of course, nothing ever goes that smoothly. This week an RUC detective-sergeant was charged with the murder of a police sergeant in Co. Antrim in 1977. This week, also, the episode of the policemen convicted of murdering a Catholic shopkeeper and kidnapping a Catholic priest was resurrected when the Apprentice Boys carried a flag donated by one of them in Derry.

The Chief Constable, John Hermon, issued a statement promising both the public and the members of his force that any wrongdoing in the ranks would be mercilessly rooted out. Public reaction to it all seems to fall into two main camps. One lot holds that this is just the tip of the iceberg, and that many more rogues lurk within the RUC, not yet brought to justice.

The opposing view is that the RUC deserves a lot of credit for rooting out any bad apples — and that the force has proved successful in refuting those who argue that police forces never adequately police themselves. Hermon's hope is that he can salvage something from the mess by promoting and encouraging that second view. After recent events, however, it looks as though his task — like that of Humphrey Atkins — is becoming harder rather than easier.

Proposals on

