

Ireland

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Ref. A0429

PRIME MINISTER

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Prospects for Political Progress in Northern Ireland

(OD(79) 32)

BACKGROUND

There have been problems over this paper which I think you should be aware of in confidence, particularly since I understand that you are yourself not altogether happy with the paper and in particular had been expecting a discussion document at this meeting. At the end of this brief I suggest how these problems might be avoided in the next round.

2. You will remember that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland originally wanted a Consultative Assembly, which would not be elected until 1981 and which would have no powers initially but on to which powers could be grafted later. OD felt that this was too slow and too lacking in substance, particularly - but by no means only - because of expectations generated by the Pope's visit. Accordingly Mr. Atkins was told to come back with proposals for a conference of the main Ulster political parties at which a number of different options could be put forward.

3. Following the OD discussion the story, which I hope very much you will not disclose that you know, has been as follows:-

- (i) The Secretary of State gave virtually no direction or steer to his officials.
- (ii) NIO officials welcomed the idea of a conference because they had felt it desirable to do something more positive and more quickly. They are not very sanguine that agreement will be reached on any of the more positive options: but even if these are rejected it will show where the blame lies and could enable us to proceed more quickly to the fallback idea of a Consultative Assembly.
- (iii) They are however convinced that it would be wrong to launch the conference publicly in advance of the SDLP Annual Conference on 2nd-4th November since the latter might then mandate Mr. Fitt, whatever his personal attitude, to an extreme position.

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- (iv) When the note by officials annexed to OD(79) 32, was submitted to Mr. Atkins he felt it very difficult to make up his mind. At heart he still wants to take this slowly whereas he knows his colleagues want him to move quickly. Hence his "dilemma" (second sentence of paragraph 3), and his attempt to square the circle by recommending early private consultations with the party leaders but no formal launching or discussion document until after the SDLP Conference.

HANDLING

4. You will want to ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to introduce his paper: and you will then want to seek the views of the Home Secretary, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence.

5. The issues for discussion seem to be:-

(a) Do the new proposals have a real chance of success?

I suspect that Mr. Atkins would still prefer his own more modest approach of a Consultative Assembly. I do not think that OD will agree with him. They will no doubt have to agree that the discussion document should not be published or the conference formally called until after the SDLP Conference (in any case it would now be virtually impossible to get a discussion document drafted and out in advance of the SDLP meeting). I have however got considerable reservations about the Secretary of State's proposal for further private consultations with the party leaders before the consultation document issues. These would probably leak and would detract from the impact of the initiative. In any case he cannot use these consultations, as he suggests, to discover whether the document would secure the parties' attendance at a conference without disclosing what will be in the document.

(b) How should the consultation document be produced?

There is now a good deal of urgency about this and, given the Secretary of State's indecisiveness, I think there would be advantage in establishing a small Ministerial group to consider a 1<sup>st</sup> outline a draft by NIO

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officials: and I think Mr. Atkins might quite welcome this. We could service it and make sure that timetables were adhered to and the right ground covered. I suggest that the group might comprise -

Home Secretary (In the Chair)  
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland  
Secretary of State for Defence  
Lord Privy Seal

(c) Will the security position be affected by the new proposals?

It is possible that any new political initiative will raise the level of violence; that a major initiative will raise the level more than a modest one; and that a major initiative which failed would be worse still. But there are indications that the level of violence will tend to rise this winter anyhow. A political initiative which succeeds undoubtedly represents the best chance of reducing violence in the long term; and even if it does nothing to reduce the level of PIRA/INLA activity, it should certainly reduce the level of popular support they receive both sides of the border. The security authorities would not want to argue against a conference.

(d) What is the international reaction likely to be?

As the paper points out, it is difficult to assess whether the chances for a successful political initiative have been improved by the Pope's visit to Ireland but that visit has certainly increased expectation of a political initiative. The domestic political situation in the United States will in any case tend to focus attention on this issue as the Presidential Election draws closer. From these points of view the new proposals should be well received.

CONCLUSION

6. In the light of the discussion you might guide the Committee to agree that:-
- (i) The NIO should now urgently prepare a discussion document which would include the options in Annex B to OD(79) 32.

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- (ii) This draft discussion document should be considered by a small group consisting of the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Secretary of State for Defence and the Lord Privy Seal with a view to it going to OD and Cabinet in time for publication shortly after the SDLP conference on 2nd-4th November.
- (iii) In the meantime Mr. Atkins should refrain from canvassing the ideas that are likely to be in the discussion document with the party leaders.

*J. Hunt*

(John Hunt)

16th October, 1979