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OD(79) 10th Meeting

COPY NO 43

CABINET

DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a Meeting held at  
10 Downing Street on  
WEDNESDAY 17 OCTOBER 1979 at 10.45 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP  
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon William Whitelaw MP  
Secretary of State for the  
Home Department

The Rt Hon Lord Hailsham  
Lord Chancellor

The Rt Hon Lord Carrington  
Secretary of State for Foreign  
and Commonwealth Affairs

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP  
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Francis Pym MP  
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Sir Ian Gilmour MP  
Lord Privy Seal

The Rt Hon John Nott MP  
Secretary of State for Trade

THE FOLLOWING WERE ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon Humphrey Atkins MP  
Secretary of State for  
Northern Ireland

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP  
Attorney General

SECRETARIAT

Sir John Hunt  
Mr R L Wade-Gery  
Mr R M Hastie-Smith

SUBJECT

POLITICAL PROGRESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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POLITICAL PROGRESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Committee considered a paper by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on Political Progress in Northern Ireland (OD(79) 32). Their discussion and conclusions reached are recorded separately.

POLITICAL PROGRESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Committee had before them a memorandum by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (OD(79) 32) setting out a proposal for a Conference with the main political parties in Northern Ireland and the various considerations relating to the proposal.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND said that he had prepared proposals for a Conference in accordance with the decision reached by the Committee on 17th June. He took it to the Appendix of his paper (the model systems of government were set out). These models, which were capable of considerable variation, would form the basis for the discussion which would be held in the context of preparing the agenda for the Conference. All the models had to regard the fact that they reflected Irish values, political independence for Ulster, and the preservation of control of law and order within the Province. Calling a Conference inevitably involved a significant risk that either the main participants would refuse to attend, or that the Conference itself would break down. A Conference that failed would also probably increase the security problem, although it is recognised that there was in any case a threat of increased violence this winter, which would well be intensified by any political initiative. The timing of the announcement of the proposed Conference was complicated by the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) Conference which was expected to be announced before that date and the risk that SDLP participation might be unduly complicated.

Cabinet Office  
17 October 1979

SECRET

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DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

LIMITED CIRCULATION ANNEX  
OD(79) 10TH MEETING MINUTES  
WEDNESDAY 17 OCTOBER 1979 AT 10.45 am

SECRET

POLITICAL PROGRESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Committee had before them a memorandum by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (OD(79) 32) setting out a proposal for a Conference with the main political parties in Northern Ireland and the various considerations relating to the proposal.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND said that he put forward proposals for a Conference in accordance with the decision reached by the Committee on 3 October. In Annex B to the Appendix of his paper five model systems of government were set out. These models, which were capable of considerable variation, would form the basis for the discussion paper which he had been invited to prepare as the agenda for the Conference. All the models had in common the fact that they ruled out Irish unity, political independence for Ulster, and the devolution of control of law and order within the Province. Calling a Conference inevitably involved a significant risk that either the main participants would refuse to attend, or that the Conference itself would break down. A Conference that failed would also greatly increase the security problem, although he recognised that there was in any case a threat of increased violence this winter, which could well be intensified by any political initiative. The timing of the announcement of the proposed Conference was complicated by the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) Conference which was scheduled for 2-4 November. An announcement before that date ran the risk that SDLP delegates to the Conference might be undesirably committed.

In discussion it was argued that the decision to summon a Conference of the main Ulster political parties had already been taken by the Committee, and that any political initiative involved a degree of risk. The greatest threat of violence in Ulster sprang from a perception of impotence by the Government.

SECRET

We should not allow ourselves to be impeded in a proposed initiative by the possible reaction of some politicians in Northern Ireland, particularly as there was a general expectation of such an initiative at home and abroad following the visit of the Pope to Ireland, and in Northern Ireland there was an overwhelming desire for peace. On the other hand, it was argued that a Conference that failed would itself be a cause of increased violence. To guard against this a possible course of action would be to announce discussions with a view to summoning a Conference. Such discussions could involve religious and trade union leaders in Northern Ireland, as well as the main political parties, in order to bring pressure to bear on the politicians. The contents of the discussion paper to be tabled at the Conference should not be published prematurely. On timing, it would be difficult to do nothing until after 4 November and it might in any case prejudice the SDLP against the proposed Conference if its announcement was seen to have been delayed until after their Conference.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Committee agreed that it was important for the Government to be seen to be taking a real political initiative in Northern Ireland as quickly as possible. This inevitably involved some degree of risk, but the possible reactions of individual Northern Irish politicians should not be regarded as an insuperable obstacle. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland should announce in the House of Commons, in a statement following questions on Thursday 25 October, that he intended to hold a Conference on Northern Ireland before the end of November. This statement should say that he would be entering into immediate discussions with political leaders and others in Northern Ireland and that he would be laying before Parliament a discussion document to be tabled at that Conference. The purpose of the preliminary discussions would be to bring direct and indirect pressure on the key political leaders to participate constructively: and the Secretary of State would not canvass the options to be contained in the discussion document or the terms on which they would attend. The preparation of the consultative document should be supervised by a Ministerial Group under the Chairmanship of the Home Secretary, consisting of the Secretary of State for Defence, Lord Privy Seal and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and the Lord Chancellor should also be associated with this work.

The Committee -

Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion.