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f.s.
V. Hunt

Ref. A0771

PRIME MINISTER

Northern Ireland - Political Initiative

You are due to see the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland this evening to discuss this subject in the particular context of Mr. Kilfedder's request that he and other Northern Ireland MPs should be invited to the Conference. A brief for this meeting is attached, and has also been given to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

2. On the current position on the Conference generally, I believe that it is fair to say that it has been as well received as could possibly have been hoped and that the difficulties which are at present being encountered should not by any means be regarded as insuperable. As evidence of this, I attach a copy of a telegram dated 26th November from our Ambassador in Dublin suggesting that Mr. Hume and the SDLP may well be open to persuasion to attend. My other main point is that in your forthcoming visits to Dublin and Washington it is clearly important that you should be seen to have made a positive political initiative which is still a very live issue and in which you have confidence.

REA

(Robert Armstrong)

27th November, 1979

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Northern Ireland Political Initiative
Brief for a Meeting between the Prime Minister and
the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland
Tuesday, 27th November

Kilfedder

The occasion for this meeting is Mr. Kilfedder's request that he and other Northern Ireland MPs should be invited to the Conference.

Current position on the Conference

2. Since the Conference in the form conceived by the Government is still very much a live possibility, it would be a mistake to risk wrecking that possibility by giving in now to pressure to change the basis of representation. The Working Paper has been generally well received and is to be debated in the House on Thursday, 29th November. Of the four parties invited to the Conference, two (Alliance and DUP) have accepted, and one (OUP) has declined. The SDLP, following Gerry Fitt's resignation, now show every sign of wanting to attend, but will need some encouragement over the possibility of discussing an 'Irish dimension' (e. g. by having the right to table appropriate papers) to get them there. The Secretary of State will have a meeting with the SDLP next week (after John Hume's election as leader) to carry this forward; and will similarly at some point see Dr. Paisley (since it is useless to win the SDLP at the cost of losing the only Unionist representatives).

3. The Conference will therefore not open on 3rd December as originally hoped; but it has been postponed, not abandoned, and could still well meet before Christmas.

Other options

4. A Conference remains the Government's first choice; but, if it proves impossible to convene, the Working Paper would remain the starting point for alternative ways forward. Possibilities include multilateral discussions to seek a basis on which the parties could come together for substantive discussions; bilateral talks with Northern Ireland political parties about the Working Paper; a different sort of Conference (e. g. Paisley's idea of a conference of Westminster and/or district council representatives); some wider sounding of

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opinion in the Province; or perhaps an Inquiry. There are advantages and disadvantages in each of these approaches, which would need further thought before any of them could be confidently recommended.

The Government's attitude

5. Given the present state of play, the Secretary of State should reaffirm in Thursday's debate the Government's view that the Working Paper sets out the ground on which progress can be made; should amplify its ideas; and should reaffirm that an all-party Conference is the right approach. He should emphasise that it is still a feasible course; and may need to say something to help the SDLP to attend.

6. While stressing the preference for a Conference, he could make clear the Government's determination to make progress even if a Conference cannot be held, and could hint at the possibilities in paragraph 4 above.

7. Similarly, the Prime Minister in her forthcoming visits to Dublin and Washington will want to convey a clear impression of confidence in the Government's initiative, and of determination to see it through.