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Postponed until next Friday 8

b/w NIO paper.

BIF 30/10/80
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Ref. A03329

PRIME MINISTER

Northern Ireland

You are due to meet the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on 23rd October at 3.00 pm to discuss the next steps in political development in Northern Ireland. As a basis of discussion NIO officials have produced a paper of which I have sent you a copy. The Home Secretary is unable to attend the meeting because of the industrial action by prison officers.

2. Mr. Atkins has sought this meeting in order to consult your views before putting specific proposals before OD, probably on 7th November. OD's conclusions would then be reflected in the line you take when you meet Mr. Haughey in December, and in the reference to Northern Ireland in The Queen's Speech.

3. The bilateral talks with the Northern Irish political parties stemmed from Cmnd 7950. As OD agreed and Cabinet endorsed in June, these talks have now run out of steam. The question is what to do next. Some, including the Secretary of State for Defence, would argue that it would be best to take no new political initiative. On this thesis, the security situation is improving and it would be right to concentrate on maintaining this improvement by a continuance of direct rule in substantially its present form, and a minimum of associated political activity. The weakness in this approach is the fact that it is unlikely to satisfy either Mr. Haughey, who has played a large part in the improvement in the security situation in Northern Ireland, or the politicians in Northern Ireland, who also need to be kept in play.

4. The paper by officials describes the present situation, and sets out a number of criteria by which the relative merits of future courses of action should be assessed. It then sets out a number of possible options for further political developments. These all require the continuance of direct rule for the foreseeable future - not as an end in itself but as a means to some as yet undefined political development. No firm recommendation is made at this stage,

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but the paper inclines towards proposals for a consultative assembly, with the possibility of adding legislative or executive powers later, if agreement could be reached: this is seen as following naturally upon the political talks of the last year.

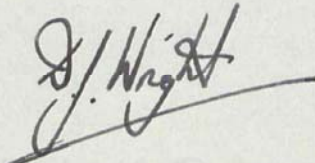
5. You could conduct your discussion with Mr. Atkins along the following lines:-

- (a) Seek his views on the present political and security situation in Northern Ireland.
- (b) Discuss the proposed criteria in paragraphs 5-8 of his paper. Do these give sufficient weight to domestic political considerations? Do they take sufficient account of the probability of Senator Kennedy being the front runner to be the next Presidential candidate for the Democrats, whether President Carter wins or loses this election? Would not this situation add urgency to the need to find a political solution soon? Do they take sufficient account of the Taoiseach's political needs, with an election due in the next two years?
- (c) Consider the proposed options in paragraph 10. Should these include the "do nothing and concentrate on security" option? It can be argued that any of the other options may produce an effect on the Northern Irish political parties which could worsen the security situation. Should option v) dealing with the "unique relationship" with the Republic be subdivided into two options? There is the possibility of taking these rather incoherent ideas seriously. But there is also the possibility that Mr. Haughey is well aware of their incoherence but wishes to be seen "travelling hopefully" down the road as part of his election campaign. Would this latter option, which in practical terms means doing nothing while talking endlessly about what we might do, create difficulties in Northern Ireland and in Westminster? Certainly in the very short term a harmonious outcome to your meeting with Mr. Haughey in December ought to do much to reduce the impact of the H block hunger strike.

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6. You may decide in conclusion that the future is still too uncertain in Northern Ireland to refer in The Queen's Speech to "bringing forward proposals" with the implication of impending legislation of which the shape has already been decided. A more anodyne phrase such as "will continue to seek a solution on which to base legislation to involve locally-elected representatives in the administration of Northern Ireland" might be preferable. You may also decide that, apart from the "do nothing" option, the broad choice in Northern Ireland appears to be between some form of local government reform (possibly involving "Ulsterisation" of posts or integration into the administration of Great Britain as sub-variants) and the creation of some kind of consultative assembly. Both of these broad options should be put to OD for consideration.



ROBERT ARMSTRONG

(approved by Sir R. Armstrong
and signed on his behalf)

22nd October, 1980

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