

CONFIDENTIAL

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Ireland

SUBJECT



10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

16 January 1981

Sean Roy,

Call by Mr. Oliver Napier

The Leader of the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland, Mr. Oliver Napier, called on the Prime Minister this morning. He was accompanied by Mr. Cook and Mr. Cushnahan. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was also present.

Mr. Napier said that the personal interest which the Prime Minister had taken in the affairs of Northern Ireland since coming to office was much valued. In particular her visit to Northern Ireland immediately after the terrible events of August 1979 had been greatly appreciated. Turning to the present, Mr. Napier said that the handling of the hunger strike at the Maze by the Government, and in particular by the Secretary of State, had been excellent. It might come to be seen as a watershed in Northern Ireland affairs. The Prime Minister said that she would have come to Northern Ireland again before Christmas but, for obvious reasons, the situation had been unfavourable. She thanked Mr. Napier for his remarks about the Government's handling of the hunger strike: she herself thought that the Northern Ireland Office had "done marvellously".

The Political Situation

Mr. Napier said that most people in Northern Ireland regarded devolved government as the norm and direct rule as a second best. Unfortunately there were deep disagreements as to how devolution should be implemented. As so often in Northern Ireland, reasonable approaches to problems were excluded by centuries-old myths and fears. Anything which seemed to weaken Northern Ireland's place within the United Kingdom would provoke a Protestant explosion. The determination of the Protestant community to resist movement in the direction of a United Ireland was absolute. It was much stronger than the desire of some elements in the Catholic community to move in the other direction. On the other hand, attempts to institute local government reform would provoke a Catholic explosion. It was abuses at the local government level which had started the civil rights movement in the first place. The Catholic community remained extremely anxious about the likely results of changes in the local government system.

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Nonetheless, in the view of the Alliance Party, one could not do nothing. The present political vacuum encouraged the terrorists since it brought the political system into disrepute. Moreover, the relative complacency induced by the current acceptance of direct rule was misplaced. The two communities in Northern Ireland were steadily drifting apart. There was therefore a need to find some form of progress. The present political leaders could not be expected to take the initiative themselves since they had a vested interest in perpetuating their disagreements. In the short term, there was no alternative but to continue with direct rule. But in the medium term, the Government at Westminster should be thinking of setting up an elected assembly on the basis that powers would be transferred to it when its members agreed to use those powers on a non-sectarian basis. This would put the ball in the court of the local politicians who would certainly come under pressure from their own constituencies to take the necessary steps to have the powers transferred to the new assembly. Mr. Napier left the attached paper with the Prime Minister in which his party's ideas are set out in more detail.

Mr. Napier said that he recognised that there could be no question of the Government taking an initiative on these lines in the immediate future. He recognised the delicacy of the security situation. Local government elections were to be held next May. Nothing should be done before then. The Government should, in other words, let some time elapse before making a move. In the ensuing discussion, Mr. Napier commented that whatever the Government did, they should eschew local government reform and the introduction of an Irish dimension. The Prime Minister commented that it had been a "tremendous mistake" to go for both at Sunningdale in 1974.

#### The Security Situation

Mr. Napier expressed warm support for the Government's policy in the security field. He agreed both with the primacy accorded to the role of the police and with the Government's determination to treat those who committed crimes as criminals. He praised both the present GOC and the Chief Constable. He made two suggestions:

- (a) that an effort should be made to increase the confidence of some of the more isolated communities along the border in the security forces. He recognised that an increase in numbers would have little effect on the security situation as such. He thought that nonetheless it might have a useful effect on the morale of the local people;
- (b) that the UDA should be declared a proscribed organisation. This need not be done immediately but was something which the Government should keep under constant review.

/ In a brief



In a brief discussion about the prison situation, the Prime Minister asked Mr. Napier whether he thought that special category status should be continued for those prisoners who already enjoyed it. Mr. Napier said that much as he would himself like to see the special category status terminated, his advice was "to leave well alone". To do otherwise would merely be to create new troubles and new myths.

The Economic Situation

Mr. Napier commented in standard terms on the economic problems of Northern Ireland. He and his colleagues both made it clear that they understood the wider economic problems faced by the Government. They said that nonetheless they sought sympathetic consideration from the Government for an area whose problems were worse than those of others. Poverty and unemployment accentuated the polarisation of the two communities.

The Anglo-Irish Summit

Mr. Napier said that his party supported increased co-operation between the United Kingdom and the Republic. There were many benefits to be gained. However, he cautioned that anything which looked like moving towards a United Ireland would be totally resisted in Northern Ireland. He accepted the Prime Minister's assurance that the Summit communique told the full story. The difficulty was that suspicion was rife in Northern Ireland. It could harden or evaporate according to developments in the next few months. One particular danger was that Government spokesmen in the Republic, in the course of an electoral campaign, might be tempted to exaggerate the significance of what had happened in Dublin. The Taoiseach should be urged to "play it cool". Developments in Anglo-Irish relations could have a considerable effect on the course of the local government campaign in Northern Ireland in the next few months. The Prime Minister made it clear that she had taken the point and that she was most grateful for Mr. Napier's exposition.

I am sending copies of this letter to Francis Richards (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and David Wright (Cabinet Office).

*Yours ever*

*Nicholas Alexander*

Roy Harrington, Esq.,  
Northern Ireland Office.