



10 DOWNING STREET

THE PRIME MINISTER

19 June 1981

Dear John

Thank you for your letter of 19 May about the Government's policy in Northern Ireland. I need scarcely say that there is much in the letter and the accompanying Annex with which I am in full agreement.

The sad sight, which has recently appeared regularly on our television screens, of our soldiers and policemen in Northern Ireland being attacked by mindless rioters cannot but move responsible, thinking people in all parts of the United Kingdom; and I am well aware of the enormous debt which we owe to those members of the security forces who have given their lives. Time and again I and Humphrey Atkins have made it clear that the Government will not be shaken off course by violence or intimidation of any sort; the sacrifices of the RUC and the Army will not be in vain. We have taken some pains over recent weeks to ensure that people throughout the United Kingdom appreciate the extent of the Government's commitment and determination to maintain policies which are manifestly right.

I acknowledge your concern about the impact of the media on the current situation in Northern Ireland. Terrorism, as you say lives on publicity; but of course the press and television must report the facts. As I said in my speech to the Conservative Women's Conference on 20 May, the press and television have a great responsibility and the line is hard to draw. However, I do not believe that in our democratic society we should seek to impose restrictions on the media other than those which already exist. The actions of the Government in sticking resolutely to democratic principles will ultimately have a far more lasting effect than the propaganda and bullying tactics of our enemies.

/You also mention

*JK*



You also mention the fears and hopes that may be aroused as a result of our developing relations with Dublin. The Government recognises that the establishment of the joint studies between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland is sensitive in certain quarters in Northern Ireland. I recognise that fears have been expressed that the objective of the joint studies is the unification of Ireland. Humphrey Atkins and I have repeatedly made it wholly clear that Northern Ireland's constitutional position within the United Kingdom is not threatened by these studies: the constitutional future of Northern Ireland is a matter for the people of Northern Ireland and for Parliament. I think that the truth of the matter has now got across. For his part Mr Haughey has recognised publicly that his Government's objective of a united Ireland cannot be realised without the consent of the majority of people of Northern Ireland.

The one point on which we differ is your claim that the rejection of full integration with Great Britain (by almost all the political parties in Northern Ireland) gives sustenance to the IRA, by encouraging the hope of some eventual change in Northern Ireland's constitutional status. I really do not believe that that is the case. As I have already said, I think that our commitment to the people of Northern Ireland is absolutely clear - witness my speeches in Northern Ireland on 5 March and 28 May. And maintenance of the union as long as that is the wish of the majority of people in Northern Ireland is in no way inconsistent with our continuing efforts to find a means of transferring responsibilities to locally elected representatives in the Province, in a way that is acceptable to all parts of the community there. After all, at last year's political Conference each of the three parties which attended favoured the devolution of legislative and executive powers, and that was also the preferred solution put forward by the Ulster Unionists in their paper to me at the time. Any suggestion that our approach represents some form of threat to the Province's constitutional position can surely be countered by reference to the Conference Working Paper (Cmnd 7763) and last year's Discussion Paper (Cmnd 7950). Both made it absolutely clear that Northern Ireland's position within the United Kingdom was not at issue.

/Again,



Again, I am grateful to you for writing. Your consistent interest in Northern Ireland's affairs, and your support for the broad thrust of our policies in these testing times, are much appreciated by both Humphrey Atkins and myself.

signed

MT

Sir John Biggs-Davison, M.P.