

SUBJECT.

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Note of a meeting held at 10 Downing Street
on Tuesday 20 December 1983 at 12 noon

Present

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP	Prime Minister
The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP	Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
The Rt Hon Leon Brittan QC MP	Secretary of State for the Home Department
The Rt Hon John Biffen MP	Lord Privy Seal
The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP	Attorney General
The Rt Hon John Wakeham MP	Parliamentary Secretary, Treasury
Mr A J E Brennan	Northern Ireland Office
Secretariat: Sir Robert Armstrong Mr A D S Goodall Mr R L L Facer	

Possible Proscription of Sinn Fein

The meeting had before them the letter from the Private Secretary to the Home Secretary to the Private Secretary to the Prime Minister dated 19 December covering a note by officials setting out the powers to proscribe organisations under legislation relating to Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

THE PRIME MINISTER said that she had held a discussion with the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and other Ministers the previous afternoon to discuss the possibility of proscribing Sinn Fein in the event of the Irish Government deciding to proscribe Sinn Fein in the Republic. The meeting had taken the view that this could put the Government in a difficult position.

In discussion the point was made that the decisive factor governing a decision whether or not to proscribe Sinn Fein would be the effect on the situation in Northern Ireland. It would not affect the fight against Irish terrorism in Great Britain. There was a considerable risk that proscription would lead to widespread civil disobedience in Northern Ireland. Sinn Fein would be likely to flout the law and invite mass arrest of their members, rather than disband their organisation and re-form under another name. They would make capital of the fact that they had won considerable support from the minority community in the General Election. Proscription might

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also be unhelpful in terms of United States opinion. On the other hand, the argument for allowing Sinn Fein to continue as a political party on the grounds that it provided a political focus for Irish nationalism in Northern Ireland was a weak one. It was important not to be seen simply to follow whatever the Irish Government decided: if, therefore, the decision were that Sinn Fein should be proscribed in the United Kingdom, if the Irish decided to proscribe it in the Republic, this pointed to an announcement being made virtually simultaneously in London and Dublin. Certain Irish Ministers were believed to take the view that Sinn Fein should be proscribed in both countries or not at all. The leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party, Mr John Hume, was believed to have told the Taoiseach that he was not in favour of proscription because of the likely consequences for law and order in Northern Ireland. There was at present no widespread call for proscription among Government supporters in Parliament. Proscription would not by itself affect the position of Sinn Fein's Member of Parliament, Mr Adams. If, however, he were to commit an offence by engaging in activities attributed to Sinn Fein after proscription and if he were sentenced to more than 12 months imprisonment he would be disqualified from membership of Parliament and could not stand again.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that there was no case for proscribing Sinn Fein unless either the Irish Government decided to do so or further major acts of terrorism occurred in Great Britain or Northern Ireland. The Secretary to the Irish Government, Mr Nally, had undertaken to inform the Secretary of the Cabinet of the outcome of the Irish Cabinet's consideration of the question that day. If Mr Nally reported that the Irish Government had not taken a firm decision, the Secretary of the Cabinet should tell him that the British Government would be very reluctant to take the step of proscribing Sinn Fein. If questioned in the House of Commons that afternoon she would say that as at present advised proscription would not be the Government's intention. The question should be brought before the Cabinet on 22 December.

The Meeting -

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

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2. Instructed the Secretary of the Cabinet:-
 - (a) to speak to the Secretary to the Irish Government on the lines indicated by the Prime Minister
 - (b) to place the matter on the agenda of the Cabinet on 22 December.

Cabinet Office

21 December 1983

Circulated to those present plus
the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

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