

MOST CONFIDENTIAL RECORD
TO
CC(84) 6th Conclusions
Thursday 16 February 1984

NORTHERN
IRELAND

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, at the Prime Minister's request, reported on the discussions which she had had with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and himself about Northern Ireland. The conclusion of these discussions was that consideration should be given to the possibility of a new approach to the Irish question. Not least among the reasons for this were the growing political strength of Provisional Sinn Fein and the continuing lack of confidence on the part of the minority community in the forces of law and order in the Province. A further factor was the impending report of the "Forum for a New Ireland" which was now expected to be made public early in March. Although the contents of the report were not known, it was clear that it would contain proposals about Northern Ireland to which the Government would have to respond. What that response should be had to be considered both from the point of view of the security situation in the Province and also from the international perspective, including the United Kingdom's relations with the United States. The discussions with the Prime Minister had accordingly concentrated on possible ways of improving security in co-operation with the Irish Republic, and of going some way to meeting the concerns of the minority community in the North. Measures considered included the possibility of joint policing in a defined area along both sides of the Irish border, and harmonisation of law enforcement procedures as between Northern Ireland and the Republic. It was, however clear that measures of this kind could be contemplated only if there was a firm indication from Dublin that the Republic would be prepared in return formally to recognise the continuing existence of the union (at least for the foreseeable future) and to waive the territorial claim on the North embodied in Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution. Although there was no hard information about the Irish Government's attitude, there were indications to suggest that, whatever solutions the Forum might advocate, the Taoiseach (Dr Fitzgerald) himself wanted priority given to improving the security situation in the North by strengthening the confidence of the minority in the forces of law and order there; and that he would like to explore with the British Government ways of reassuring unionist opinion about Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom in return for arrangements which would associate the Republic in some visible way with law enforcement in the Province.

Without clearer information about the thinking of the Dublin Government it was impossible to judge whether there was any realistic prospect of making progress along these lines or to try to work out the details of a possible package. Subject to the views of the Cabinet, therefore, the Prime Minister proposed to ask the Secretary of the Cabinet to make an informal, confidential and strictly exploratory approach to the Secretary of the Irish Government, Mr Dermot Nally. The object of this approach would be simply to sound out the Irish position without any commitment on either side and to signal to the Taoiseach in advance of the

Forum's report that the British Government was thinking constructively about the problem. The fact that this approach was being made, which could constitute a major development in the Government's position on the Irish question, would clearly be of the greatest sensitivity. It was thought that the Taoiseach and Mr Nally would do their best to keep it secret, at least as long as the discussions were purely exploratory in character. But it would be made clear to the Irish from the outset that everything was dependent on their being willing and able to deliver an acceptably binding commitment to waive their territorial claim and acknowledge the continuing existence of the union, at least for the foreseeable future. So long as it could truthfully be said that any exploratory discussions were being conducted on this premise, and with the aim of improving the security situation, the fact of such discussions taking place - if it did become known - would be publicly defensible. If the Cabinet agreed to proceed as proposed it would be necessary to consider the matter again in the light of the Irish Government's response; and the Cabinet would be fully consulted before any firm or detailed proposals were put to the Irish Government.

In discussion it was pointed out that the abandonment by the Irish Republic of its territorial claim to the North would involve amending the territorial provisions of the Irish Constitution and that this would require a referendum in the Republic. It was unlikely that any Irish Government would be ready to hold such a referendum, the result of which appeared almost certainly to be negative. It might be possible to devise a means whereby the Irish Republic could waive its territorial claim without formal amendment of the Constitution, but a declaration by the present Irish Government to this effect, unaccompanied by constitutional amendment, would carry no conviction with unionist opinion and would be liable to be revoked by a future Fianna Fail Government. For the British Government to enter into negotiations with the Irish on the basis of a pledge by the Irish Government about the union which it was subsequently unable to deliver could be highly damaging. It was, however, impossible to judge what might or might not be negotiable without first exploring the attitude of the Irish Government. Although experience suggested that any British initiative on Northern Ireland was likely to raise unjustified expectations and fears in the Province and thereby make matters worse, the present situation there was so bad that it would be wrong not to explore the possibilities for change. The consequences of doing nothing could be as damaging in terms of continued loss of life as the consequences of seeking a new approach. Contacts with the Irish Government on the question were intrinsically desirable. The growing political strength of Provisional Sinn Fein and the impending report of the "Forum for a New Ireland" would have implications for the United Kingdom's foreign relations, notably with the United States, and the approach outlined by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland appeared to represent the least unpromising way forward. Any new approach to the problem by the British Government would arouse fierce unionist hostility, but it would be wrong to be deterred from undertaking a preliminary, low-key exploration of the possibilities with the Irish.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Cabinet was in agreement that the Secretary of the Cabinet should make an informal, secret and strictly exploratory approach to the Secretary of the Irish Government on the lines outlined by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

SECRET

The Cabinet -

Instructed the Secretary of the Cabinet to proceed on the lines proposed, and to report.