

MOST CONFIDENTIAL RECORD  
TO  
CC(84) 24th Conclusions

Thursday 28 June 1984

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PARLIAMENTARY  
AFFAIRS

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Northern  
Ireland

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the Cabinet would recall authorising the Secretary of the Cabinet to explore, in informal and secret discussions with the Secretary of the Irish Government, Mr Dermot Nally, the possibility of identifying a basis for agreement under which the Republic would reassure opinion in Northern Ireland by taking formal action which would have the effect of waiving or suspending the territorial claim to Northern Ireland embodied in the Irish constitution, and would reaffirm the acceptance of the principle that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland could be changed only with the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland, in return for arrangements providing for joint activity in the field of security and for political arrangements which could strengthen the position of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) against Sinn Fein. A preliminary round of discussions had taken place, and the Irish Government had welcomed the United Kingdom's constructive approach to the exchanges. Since then, the New Ireland Forum's report had been published. It would now be appropriate for the Cabinet to authorise further exploratory discussions which would be designed to establish a clearer picture of the extent of Irish willingness to develop the dual approach which had been outlined, and to explore further what possibility there was of agreeing upon arrangements which would be acceptable both to unionist and to nationalist opinion in Northern Ireland. There were obvious difficulties. The New Ireland Forum's report had identified the three options of a unitary state, a confederal state, or joint authority. The Irish argued that they had deliberately avoided the term "joint sovereignty"; there were differences of view on the implications of the concept of "joint authority" for the continuing exercise of British sovereignty. It was nevertheless clear that the situation in Northern Ireland could not be left as it was without some further attempt to explore the possibility of reassuring the Unionists on the border issue while offering to the Republic some political movement affecting security and the Assembly. The Irish argued that they could not, for their part, undertake significant concessions on the territorial and border issues unless they were offered a reasonable package in return. Both sides recognised their joint interest in weakening support in Northern Ireland for Sinn Fein. A further round of exploratory discussions would be secret: knowledge of the exchanges to date had not leaked out, and it was vital that secrecy should continue to be preserved. If there were to be a leak, the Irish Government would be unable to continue the process.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND summarised, at the Prime Minister's invitation, his approach to the forthcoming Parliamentary debate, on 2 July, on the report of the New Ireland Forum and other documents. He noted that, with the "marching season" due to begin on 12 July, it would be important to avoid pushing the political parties in Northern Ireland into hard positions. He would therefore adopt a quiet

approach, identifying the difficulties which the New Ireland Forum's report posed: it was clear that changes could not take place in Northern Ireland without consent and that none of the three courses sketched out in the report could command consent. He could nevertheless welcome some positive elements in the report and make it clear that it was the political parties in Northern Ireland themselves which could make the greatest contribution to progress. It was notable that there had been a significant change in the position of the leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, Mr Ian Paisley. After winning a personal vote of over one-third of the total in the elections to the European Parliament, Mr Paisley was evidently in a strong position and felt able to carry his party with him. He had indicated that he would be prepared to engage in private talks with the leader of the SDLP, Mr John Hume, who, for his part, did not rule this out in his search for a package with an Irish dimension. Quiet discussions of this kind could conceivably produce a helpful outcome, and it was therefore important, in the forthcoming Parliamentary debate, that nothing should be said which might prejudice them. Internal divisions in the Official Unionist Party made it harder to deal with; but "The Way Forward" was a good document and the extent of its recognition of the rights of the minority was encouraging. The Irish Government were unlikely to be disturbed by the debate if they knew that the secret exchanges which the Prime Minister had described were to go ahead: he could therefore afford, in the debate, to avoid upsetting the Unionists, thereby preserving the possibility of talks between them and the SDLP.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, again emphasised the importance of continuing the secret discussions between the Secretary of the Cabinet and the Secretary of the Irish Government. It was one thing to establish the framework for possible progress but another to move into the next phase of identifying specific means of achieving it. If complete secrecy were not preserved progress would be impossible. It was necessary at this juncture to look further ahead in Ireland than the British Government had done before. Ten thousand British soldiers could not be left in Northern Ireland forever, nor could the very considerable cost of subsidising the Province be sustained, without continuing the search for possible forward movement.

The Cabinet -

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