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30th November 1981

CONFIDENTIAL

The Rt. Hon. Margaret Thatcher, MP.,  
Prime Minister,  
No. 10 Downing Street,  
London W1.

RS/12

Dear Prime Minister,

Last week I visited the border area in Northern Ireland covering the whole of South Armagh and the Fermanagh/Tyrone border and was able to discuss the border security situation in depth with members of the RUC, UDR and local community leaders in church and politics, and later met a gathering of senior civic leaders, lawyers and local politicians in Belfast.

I had the great advantage that as an academic student of terrorism for some years, I have built up good contacts with all these groups and through frequent visits have been able to monitor developments and to get a closer understanding of the situation and the mood on the ground than one can obtain by official tours and press statements.

The enclosed assessment has been prepared exclusively for your use and will not be reproduced or publicised. Please feel free to draw on it as fully as you wish, and if you wish me to discuss any aspects of my report, I will be ready to visit your office at short notice to answer any questions you may wish to put to me.

I admire the courage and commitment which you have brought to bear on this tragic problem. The government has been splendidly firm in standing out to the terrorist campaign and I am sure that the broad framework of policy is sound. However, the recent spate of IRA atrocities and Paisley's moves to set up a private army and his efforts to play on the fears and apprehensions of the Protestant majority have created a situation fraught with pitfalls for the government. The dangers are accentuated by the new Secretary of State's lack of experience in Ulster affairs, and the deep distrust and hostility which has been created towards him as a result of the circumstances of his appointment and some of his less than well considered comments on the Northern Ireland conflict when his appointment was announced.

The government has a matchless opportunity to get both strategy and tactics for bringing peace to Northern Ireland absolutely right and for seeing it through, and therefore I beg you to keep in full control of



the situation, particularly during this critical period, when errors of judgement and the temptations of political opportunism and 'quick-fix' solutions could lead an inexperienced departmental minister into the horrors of civil war.

Yours sincerely,

*Paul Wilkinson*  
Paul Wilkinson.

Encl.



Assessment of Political and Security Situation in Northern Ireland,  
30th November, 1981.

POLITICAL SITUATION

1. The Anglo-Irish intergovernmental talks inevitably created apprehension and suspicion among moderate Protestant and outright fear and hostility among the Paisleyite militants. Those of us who have been strong advocates of the Dublin-London intergovernmental dialogue fully expected this reaction. A sectarian feeling and resentment, deepened by twelve years of terrorist conflict, is bound to oppose any such attempts at constructive co-operation with the Republic.
  
2. The majority of Official Unionist and UDA members accept HMG's repeated assurances that the Anglo-Irish summit talks and joint studies are simply vehicles for improved co-operation and relations of mutual benefit and are not a sly diplomatic ploy for selling out the Unionist majority. Moderates in the majority community believe you, Prime Minister, when you repeatedly give your public assurance that the British guarantee to maintain the status of the province as an integral part of the United Kingdom, unless and until a majority of the province's population should decide otherwise. On the other hand Paisley has been exploiting the feelings of outrage and frustration following the murder of the Rev. Robert Bradford, MP, to play on the fears of the less politically sophisticated members of the Protestant community. He and his followers have been portraying the Anglo-Irish Council as the first stage to delivering the entire Ulster community into the hands of unification with the Republic. It matters not a whit to the Paisleyite extremists that the accord published following the Anglo-Irish Council talks



reiterates the guarantee that there will be no change in the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority. They are more interested in inuendo and smear than in the real facts of the situation.

3. If the support and confidence of the sensible moderate Protestant community is to be retained, the Paisleyite propaganda campaign against the Anglo-Irish Council must be forcefully combatted. The most dramatic and effective way of doing this would be for you as Prime Minister to make a speech in Ulster to the Official Unionist and other moderate Protestant groups unambiguously restating the principle that, so long as the Unionist majority wish to maintain the status of Northern Ireland as a province of the United Kingdom, the government of the United Kingdom will fully honour its obligations to maintain their rights and their defence. This declaration would be powerfully augmented by a simultaneous statement by Dr. Garret Fitzgerald repeating his party's promise that there is no question of the Republic attempting to impose the reunification of Ireland against the consent of the Protestant majority in the north. (I heard this principle of consent restated forcefully by Irish Government representatives at last week's British-Irish Association Conference in Lambeth Palace. There is little doubt they are so worried about the dangers of civil war in the north that they would be prepared to make this declaration in order to calm passions and undermine Paisley's demagogism). An alternative tactic would be to draw attention to this publicly stated Irish Government position in your own speech. A move of this kind would give a tremendous boost to the morale of the Protestant population and would help to win over more support for the eminently practical and sensible Anglo-Irish Council approach to



intergovernmental co-operation.

4. In the long term however a more tangible means of conciliating moderate Protestant opinion would be to re-establish a devolved government for the province incorporating maximum constitutional guarantees and participation for the minority community. This would have three immediate advantages. First it would remove the political vacuum in which Paisley is able to use his quasi-fascist direct action tactics with such damaging effect. Secondly it would provide all the moderate and genuinely parliamentary party leaders in the province with an instrument for improving their own co-operation, strengthening the middle ground of compromise and good sense and working constructively to improve the economic and social differences in our battered province. The third advantage is that it would provide a parliamentary tier to the structure of government, thus providing a natural and secure means of Northern Ireland politicians participating on an equal level with their Irish opposite numbers in the intergovernmental discussions on such matters as economic co-operation. (Those who attended the Lambeth Palace Conference on 27th November will, I believe, confirm my judgement that there is a genuine yearning among the SDLP Alliance and Official Unionist groups for this kind of assembly framework. There is absolutely no evidence that Paisley has sufficient support even among the rural Protestant community in the north of the province to 'take over' or even dominate a devolved assembly. Most Protestants I spoke to described Paisley in scathing terms as a big mouth who had done nothing to benefit Ulster people).
5. Finally, I must touch on the delicate matter of the Secretary of State's own position. It was, to say the least, unfortunate that



Mr. Prior's appointment was portrayed as the reluctant exile of a politician with his heart and his ambitions so firmly in Westminster politics. While I do not personally doubt Mr. Prior's honourable intentions and goodwill towards the province, every single Protestant I spoke to in the province does, and their animosity was undoubtedly increased by Mr. Prior's unfortunate comments shortly after his appointment about 'knocking peoples' heads together' and 'hitting them on the backsides.' This was extremely unwise coming from someone with no personal experience or profound knowledge of the complex tragedy of the Northern Ireland conflict. Thus it would be a mistake to assume that Protestant antipathy to Mr. Prior is limited to the Paisleyites. In order to keep the vital confidence and support of moderate Protestants, as I see it, you have two options; either to take the earliest opportunity of moving Mr. Prior to an economic or other post where he will be removed from the Northern Ireland scene, or to take a direct and continuous oversight of the delicate and dangerous situation in the province compensating for Mr. Prior's inexperience and ensuring that he is not carried away by the enthusiasm of some of his officials and the Junior Minister, the Earl of Gowrie, who have somehow obtained the naive notion of a quick-fix solution to the Northern Ireland problem, involving some form of deal with the Irish Republic and a British withdrawal. I may be being unfair about the Earl of Gowrie for he is newly in post and may have already modified his initial views in a more realistic direction, but I have it on good authority that one of his moves when he arrived in the province was to invite journalists to discuss the possibilities of a deal of this kind. You will not be surprised to learn that the moderate Protestant antipathy for poor Mr. Scott and the Earl of Gowrie, is if anything, even greater than the antipathy



to Mr. Prior. It may well be worth considering a total re-shaping of the junior ministerial team at the Northern Ireland office if you decide to keep Mr. Prior on, but to take more direct personal interest in the affairs of the province.

THE SECURITY SITUATION

6. It is a cardinal principle of a liberal democracy's campaign against terrorism that one should not try to mould one's policy in reaction to the latest atrocities. Those who truly understand the nature of terrorist violence, as I believe you yourself do, have always understood that the closer democratic government comes to rational reforms in the political and economic systems, the more the anti-democratic petty tyrannies of terrorist organisations will seek to wreck peace and democracy. Hence it is entirely illusory to believe that merely by establishing a certain devolved framework with an element of minority participation and by strengthening long-term co-operation between the Republic and its north neighbour, that one could cause terrorism to wither away. There is a chance that one would, by maximising consent from the Catholic and Protestant moderates, increasingly isolate the terrorists from the general population. But to some extent this isolation is already happening because of the public revulsion at terrorist atrocities and the increasingly bold stand of Catholic Church leaders against the IRA. However, particularly since its 1977 re-organisation into a terrorist cell structure, the IRA does not need wide public support or participation in order to continue sowing death and destruction. On the contrary, in a sense the IRA's very isolation from the community makes it a more difficult quarry for the police.



7. Hence a cardinal pre-condition of progress towards peace in Northern Ireland must be a determined and effective campaign to eradicate terrorism using all methods compatible with the continuance of democracy and the rule of law.

I know that your own and your government's will to defeat terrorism is more determined than ever following the recent cowardly attacks in London and Northern Ireland. But there is no doubt that the moderate Protestant community and the law-abiding majority of the Catholic community are not convinced that this will is being translated into effective security policy in Northern Ireland, and in order to maintain their confidence and support, it is vital that the government embark on a new security initiative to crack down still harder on terrorism in the province. It must be realised that the main effort for this crack-down must come from the security forces in the north, for although co-operation with the Republic in the form of intelligence sharing has been markedly improved since the security discussions of Autumn 1979, the harsh fact is that the Garda is an unarmed force and that political constraints prevent it from joining in combined operations with the security forces on the north side of the border in the hot pursuit of terrorists. This, combined with the unwillingness of the Republic authority to extradite terrorists, means that terrorists can escape across the border with relative ease and thus are able to continue with their campaign of genocide against the beleaguered Protestant farmers, UDR men, police and reservists in the border area. There is hardly a family in the border areas of South Armagh and Fermanagh that I visited who have not lost a relative or a close friend in this brutal murder campaign.



8. There are a number of practical emergency measures that the government can, and must, take to assist in the protection of the innocent and to help deter the terrorists. None of the measures I suggest would undercut the general principle of police primacy which, in my view, was rightly adopted as the basis of security strategy in the province after 1976.
  
9. The rate of terrorist murders on the Fermanagh border is relatively lower than is the case in South Armagh and the obvious reason for this is that there are more blocked crossing points and manned checkpoints on the Fermanagh border. Although this does not prevent occasional terrorist penetration, it has been a considerable deterrent. In my view the government's policy of leaving the entire frontier area of H Division of the RUC free and uncontrolled is a disastrous weakness. The Irish Republic Ministry for Justice was fully entitled to complain about the lack of continuous surveillance in South Armagh in the circumstances of the search for the kidnappers of Mr. Dunne. Although there are four RUC stations in the area and a divisional mobile support unit which patrols much of the area in daylight, the harsh fact is that there is no constant police or military patrol on the ground to control the boundary or to provide protection for the inhabitants.
  
10. Frontier control would be facilitated by closing the Cullaville concession road and the country bridges at Cullaville and Altnamachan. Additionally, minor crossings, particularly over the Fane River, should be effectively blocked.
  
11. Following the useful example in Fermanagh, regular army units should be introduced in the South Armagh to man the main frontier crossings and other key roads in the county with appropriate vehicle checkpoints. There can be no doubt that this makes the task of the terrorists



all the more difficult by forcing them to abandon vehicles in order to cross the frontier. A further move which would help to seal the frontier would be to introduce more regular army foot patrols in the South Armagh border areas. There has been too much deployment of UDR and regular army for static defence duties and the new spearhead troops consist of units inexperienced in Northern Ireland and are therefore mainly of symbolic importance in restoring morale among the urban population.

12. Careful consideration should also be given to re-establishing a UDR base between Strabane and Londonderry as the frontier area between Donemana and Gartin is now virtually unprotected and isolated. If the regular army had been deployed on the Castlederg sector, the UDR could have been more usefully deployed in other areas.
13. Urgent consideration should be given to providing the RUC and UDR men with better weapons for personal protection when they are off duty. The .22 is a peashooter compared to the sophisticated fire power now available to the IRA. .38 revolvers should be made available to all police and UDR men and reservists for personal protection purposes.

In some areas where the RUC is the force most immediately on hand to respond to a terrorist incident, there should be provision of grenades and machine-guns in order to respond with greater fire power to a major attack. It is believed that the IRA still has M60 machine-gun capability. They are more likely to use this against the RUC than against well-armed troops. RUC mobile vehicles should be equipped with saracen cars mounted with machine-guns.



14. Last, but not least, urgent consideration should be given to increasing the size of the SAS force deployed in the border areas and on undercover duties. The SAS with its unique skills and experience has made a tremendous impact in improving the overall security situation. The benefits of an additional deployment in the province would be out of all proportion to the modest cost of these units. I strongly urge the government to increase these particularly valuable resources for the war against terrorism.

#### CONCLUSION

It should be stressed that none of these individual political and security measures will be sufficient in itself to stem the slide of the province into civil war and the collapse of confidence among the moderate population. It is urgently necessary for HMG to compliment the wise and constructive development of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council by a suitable and effective devolved governmental structure for Northern Ireland and a determined security initiative along the lines described above. These measures, in combination, would strengthen the middle ground of politics and economic co-operation both within the province and between North and South, while at the same time further isolating and undermining the extremists.

Paul Wilkinson.

30th November 1981.