



32

Ref. A084/2702

PRIME MINISTER

At your meeting with the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland there was discussion of the need to take early soundings of the political parties in Northern Ireland about some of the ground being covered in our confidential exchanges with the Irish Government. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland explained that he was in any case due to have a further round of discussions with political leaders in the North, and both you and he were, I think, concerned to avoid the risk of accusations of bad faith which could be levelled at the Government if your next meeting with Dr FitzGerald on 19 November led to statements of intention by the British and Irish Governments for which political opinion in Northern Ireland had not been prepared.

2. I recognise the force of this consideration. But I feel bound to draw attention to the very considerable risks that would flow from discussing these matters, even obliquely, with the Northern Ireland parties at this stage; and to question whether it is really necessary to run these risks before your meeting with Dr FitzGerald.

3. The Unionists already have reason to suspect that there is a process of secret talks between the British and Irish Governments, and there has been speculation about the possible content of these talks. They would be bound to associate any kite-flying by the Secretary of State with their suspicions. The reciprocal balance of the package - on the one hand joint security arrangements and institutionalised consultation with the Irish Government, on the other hand amendment of the Irish Constitution and some form of devolution to a majority-run executive in Northern Ireland - could not be displayed without saying something about amendment of the Irish Constitution. It would be difficult to say anything about without serious risk of at least implying that the Irish Government were ready to concede it. If the Unionists came to



believe that that was or might be available, they would be very likely to publicise their belief. Any premature disclosure or even hint at the Irish Government's readiness to think in these terms could not only wreck the process on which we are engaged with the Irish Government but also bring down Dr FitzGerald's Government.

4. If on the other hand we were to indicate to political leaders in Northern Ireland that we were considering the possibility of measures such as joint security arrangements, institutionalised consultation or the involvement in criminal trials of judges from both jurisdictions, without being able to make it clear that all such moves on our part would be conditional on the Republic's amending its Constitution, the Unionists would accuse the British Government of selling the pass on the Union without safeguards or recompense.

5. I also believe that it would be premature to discuss these ideas with the Northern Ireland parties until after your meeting with the Taoiseach. Our talks with the Irish Government so far have been exploratory and without commitment of principals. There is no possibility of our having ready by 19 November a package of proposals which you and the Taoiseach can accept or reject. We shall report to you on the progress of work so far, and you and the Taoiseach will have to decide whether there are the makings of a possible package which could be a viable joint initiative by the two Governments - in which case you will want to authorise further work but you will not need to commit yourself to going ahead with whatever emerges from that further work - or whether the work so far demonstrates that there is no politically viable basis for such an initiative. If you decide the latter, you will want to disengage from the exercise with the minimum of political fuss; and you will surely want not to have aroused Unionist suspicions unnecessarily. There is surely no point in risking what could be a major confrontation with the Unionists unless and until you and your colleagues have weighed the whole package, discussed it with the Taoiseach, and taken a deliberate decision to go ahead.



6. For all these reasons I hope that in his contacts with the political leaders in Northern Ireland, before your meeting with the Taoiseach on 19 November, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland can confine himself to probing the unionist parties on ideas which they have themselves suggested (eg a Bill of Rights) and to exploring with them how they would propose to follow up the hints they have given of greater readiness to take account of nationalist concerns.

7. As to the handling of Parliamentary Questions about our contacts with the Irish, it might be possible to deal with these by reference to Mr Prior's speech in the House of Commons debate on the Forum Report on 2 July, when he said that the Government would "want to have talks with each of the parties involved and with the Irish Government". We could say that the discussions with the Northern Ireland political parties which Mr Prior initiated and Mr Hurd was continuing were taking place in fulfilment of that undertaking; that views were being exchanged in parallel with the Irish Government through our regular official and diplomatic contacts with Dublin; and that your forthcoming meeting with the Taoiseach would provide an important opportunity to continue that process. If pressed (as we no doubt shall be) to say what ideas were being canvassed with the Irish, we could refer to Mr Prior's further statement that "ideas in many areas - security, economic and parliamentary - are worth exploring for the benefits that they will bring to all sides"; and say that it would be inappropriate to go into further detail, bearing in mind that our contacts with the Irish (like those with the Northern Ireland political parties) were being conducted at this stage on a purely exploratory basis, without any commitment on either side.

8. This will of course constitute confirmation that we are in touch with the Irish Government about Northern Ireland affairs and will no doubt provoke unionist criticism and pressure to disclose details. But I would hope that it would be sufficient to hold the position until the meeting with Dr FitzGerald has



taken place. Thereafter, the line to be taken in Parliament will depend on the outcome of your meeting with Dr FitzGerald and on whatever statement may be issued at the conclusion of that meeting.

9. I am sending copies of this minute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Sir Antony Acland, Mr Robert Andrew, Mr David Goodall and Sir Philip Woodfield.

REA

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

10 October 1984