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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

17 October 1984

*Dear Charles,*Northern Ireland

The Foreign Secretary has seen a copy of the Northern Ireland Secretary's undated minute to the Prime Minister commenting on Sir Robert Armstrong's minute to her of 10 October, which set out the risks that would be involved in speaking to the Northern Ireland parties in advance of the November Summit about the ground now being covered in confidential exchanges with the Irish Government.

The Foreign Secretary questions whether the Northern Ireland Secretary need expose as much surface as he suggests in paragraph 5-6 of his minute. On paragraph 6 in particular, Ministers and officials involved have been scrupulous in avoiding comment on the public speculation about possible secret talks with the Irish. Nevertheless most of the elements of the package, which have been explored in those talks, have been discussed in the press. Any alert member of the public with an interest in Northern Ireland will be aware of the speculation and able to draw his own conclusions. The Unionist leaders in question certainly fall into this category. It may thus be more difficult in practice than the Northern Ireland Secretary hopes to keep the discussion on a "hypothetical basis", and arguably unlikely that Mr Molyneux or Mr Paisley would report it in those terms to their supporters afterwards. The Foreign Secretary therefore questions the judgement in the first sentence of paragraph 7.

He also has substantial reservations about the idea of expressing interest in "majority rule with safeguards" (the last sentence in paragraph 5). Unionist politicians would be bound to seize on this as a sign of support, and to trumpet it abroad. It would have an extremely damaging effect on opinion in the South and on the Nationalist community in the North. Sir Geoffrey believes it would be better to confine ourselves to exploring what the Unionists mean when they talk about provincial arrangements with safeguards for the minority, without any reference on the Government's part to "majority rule".

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The Foreign Secretary is also concerned about what might be said to the Irish Government in advance. To some extent the Dublin Government have already been put on notice (by Mr Prior's statement in the debate on 2 July) that the Northern Ireland Secretary will be having talks of this kind with party leaders in the North. Sir Geoffrey takes the point that in order to avoid possible accusations of undermining the Summit in advance it is necessary to say something more. But he wonders whether it is necessary to say very much. It is more than likely that, if the Northern Ireland Secretary were to tell Mr Barry the full extent of his intentions, then Barry would ask him to abandon his plan, because of the severe political embarrassment which would be created for Dr FitzGerald's Government by a premature or partial revelation of the nature of the package under discussion. It is not clear what the Northern Ireland Secretary would do in such circumstances. To disregard Mr Barry's objections would provoke a row with the Irish and prejudice the exercise we are engaged in with them. Simply to bow to his wishes would be to accept an undesirable degree of constraint on what is formally an internal matter for the United Kingdom.

The Foreign Secretary acknowledges that if all these hazards could be successfully negotiated, then HMG's freedom of manoeuvre would be considerably enlarged. But he is no doubt about the substantial nature of the risks involved and so about the need to continue along the path of caution. He therefore hopes that the Northern Ireland Secretary will be extremely circumspect in talking to the parties in the North, and will not go beyond what courtesy demands when he sees Mr Barry on 25 October.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Private Secretaries to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours ever,

Les Appleyard

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