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NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE
WHITEHALL
LONDON SW1A 2AZ

SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR
NORTHERN IRELAND

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
LONDON
SW1

*Time limit
Agree to the
proposed low
key approach?
16 November 1984
CDP
16/xi*

Dear Prime Minister,

THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE AND NORTHERN IRELAND

I am writing to let you know how I propose to handle a series of reports on Northern Ireland which the committees of the Council of Europe are shortly to start preparing.

In May a number of members of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, led by Irish members, tabled a motion "recognising" the New Ireland Forum Report, and calling for reports from three of the Assembly's committees - the Political Affairs Committee (PAC), the Legal Affairs Committee (LAC), and the Economic Affairs and Development Committee (EADC). Despite valiant attempts by Freddie Bennett to have the motion dropped, it was referred to the committees by the Assembly. The three committees have now each appointed a rapporteur and we understand that they are likely to begin work soon. Their reports could be debated by the committees in January, and by the Parliamentary Assembly later that month, though it is very unlikely that work will proceed so swiftly. We need now to consider what attitude to take to their work and how we should respond to any approaches they may make to us.

There is something of a precedent in the recent Haagerup Report on Northern Ireland which he produced for the European Parliament. We opposed that on the grounds that the Parliament had no competence to deal with the internal affairs of a member state and publicly refused it any help at all. We were able to ensure, however, that the Government's case was well understood through the good offices of the EDG and, with the help of a sympathetic rapporteur, the final report was reasonably helpful.

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The Council of Europe's initiative is less likely to gain public attention outside Ireland North and South, but it could also turn out tiresome. The presence of 3 rapporteurs, not all of whom are sympathetic to us, will make the approach which we adopted on Haagerup much less likely to succeed. With our help, Freddie Bennett and his colleagues have done their best to frustrate progress. But since the Council is technically able to consider subjects like Northern Ireland, and indeed did so in 1975 without the then British Government objecting, we are not on particularly strong grounds in opposing it on principle.

I think we should do our best to avoid attracting too much attention to the Council of Europe's efforts. A low key response is likely to ~~best~~ achieve this. We should make clear that we cannot see anything helpful coming out of the Reports since this is essentially a matter for the British Government in consultation with others most closely involved. There may nevertheless be opportunities to influence the rapporteurs and if so we should take them. In the first instance, I am ensuring that Freddie Bennett and our other colleagues are well briefed and that the UK Representative in Strasbourg can respond fruitfully and convincingly to any approaches he receives. I am giving Freddie Bennett some factual material on Northern Ireland, for him to pass on to the rapporteurs. I would also take advantage of any other low key opportunities which may offer. In particular Freddie Bennett has it in mind to arrange an informal lunch for me in London with the PAC rapporteur, (an Italian Christian Democrat) whom he believes to be sympathetic.

This would be a mistake. A similar thing is possibly known by S.J.S.

Freddie Bennett believes that you were made aware of the background to this by Jim Prior. I am of course in close touch with him and have worked out this line in concert with him. F.B.

I am copying this letter to Geoffrey Howe and would be glad to know that you and he are content to proceed in this way.

Lower,

Douglas