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Ref. A084/539

PRIME MINISTER

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Northern Ireland

--- In accordance with the conclusions reached at your meeting on 10 February with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, I submit a speaking note for you to use at the beginning of Cabinet tomorrow.

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ROBERT ARMSTRONG

15 February 1984



DRAFT SPEAKING NOTENorthern Ireland

I told Cabinet on 22 December that consideration needed to be given to the wider aspects of the Irish question and the possibility of finding new approaches to it; and I would be discussing this over the Christmas Recess with those colleagues most directly concerned.

2. My discussions with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland have led us to the conclusion that we do now need to consider the possibility of a new approach to the Irish question. Not least among the reasons for this are the growing political strength of Provisional Sinn Fein and the continuing lack of confidence on the part of the minority community in the forces of law and order in the Province. Unless we can offer the minority some reassurance, particularly on the security side, there is a real risk that by the time of the local elections in 1985 Provisional Sinn Fein will overtake the SDLP as the party representing the majority of the nationalist community. This would enable them to claim a greater degree of political legitimacy for their objectives and greater justification for the use of terrorism in pursuing them. We know that the Irish Government is seriously concerned about this possibility. I myself believe





that, after 15 years of casualties to the security forces in Northern Ireland, we should be wrong on both security and economic grounds to allow the present situation in Northern Ireland to continue indefinitely.

3. A further factor in the situation is the impending report of the "Forum for a New Ireland", which is now expected to present its report early next month. Although we do not know what the report will say, it is clear that it will contain proposals about Northern Ireland to which we shall be obliged to make some response. What that response should be has to be considered both from the point of view of the security situation in the Province, and also from the international perspective (our relations with the United States as well as with the Republic).

4. Against this background, my discussion with the two Secretaries of State has concentrated on possible ways of improving security in co-operation with the Republic and of going some way to meeting the concerns of the minority community in the North. We have considered among other things the possibility of joint policing in a defined area along both sides of the Irish border, and harmonisation of law enforcement procedures as between Northern Ireland and the Republic. But it is clear that we could contemplate measures of this kind only if we receive a firm indication from





Dublin that the Republic would be prepared in return formally to recognise the continuing existence of the union (at least for the foreseeable future) and to waive the territorial claim on the North embodied in Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution.

5. Although there is no hard information about the Irish Government's attitude, there are indications from Dublin to suggest that, whatever solutions the Forum may advocate, the Taoiseach himself wants priority given to improving the security situation in the North by strengthening the confidence of the minority in the forces of law and order there; and that he would like to explore with us ways of reassuring unionist opinion about Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom in return for arrangements which would associate the Republic in some visible way with law enforcement in the Province.

6. Without obtaining a much clearer idea than we have at present of the thinking of the Dublin Government, it is impossible to judge whether there is any realistic prospect of making progress along these lines, or to try to work out the details of a possible package. Subject to the views of the Cabinet, therefore, I propose to ask the Secretary of the Cabinet to make an informal, confidential and strictly exploratory approach to the Secretary of the Irish Government, Mr Dermot Nally. The object





of this approach would be simply to sound out the Irish position without any commitment on either side and to signal to the Taoiseach in advance of the Forum's report that the British Government is thinking constructively about the problem.

7. The fact that we are making this approach, which could itself constitute a major development in the Government's position on the Irish question, would clearly be of the greatest sensitivity. We think that the Taoiseach and Mr Nally would do their best to keep it secret, at least as long as the discussions were purely exploratory in character. But we should make it clear to the Irish from the outset that everything was dependent on their being willing and able to deliver an acceptably binding commitment to waive their territorial claim and acknowledge the union, at least for the foreseeable future. So long as we could truthfully say that any exploratory discussions were being conducted on this premise, and with the aim of improving the security situation, the fact of such discussions taking place - if it did become known - would be publicly defensible.

8. If the Cabinet agrees that we should proceed as proposed, we shall consider the matter again in the light of the Irish Government's response; and the Cabinet will, of course, be fully consulted before any firm or detailed proposals are put to the Irish Government.