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Prime Minister

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PRIME MINISTER

ANGLO-IRISH RELATIONS: NORTHERN IRELAND

I understand that we are to meet on 21 June to discuss the papers circulated with Sir Robert Armstrong's minute to you of 12 June. It may be helpful if I offer you some comments in advance.

2. The paper on Repartition seems to me to bring out very clearly the enormous difficulties, both practical and political, which would be involved in redrawing the border and moving parts of the population in such a way as to establish a smaller, more homogeneous Province. I do not believe that this offers an acceptable solution. We might possibly be driven to such draconian measures if we were faced with imminent civil war, or as a result of civil war; but I do not believe that we have reached that stage.

3. So far as the main paper is concerned, I believe that the key question to which we must address ourselves is whether the apparent readiness of the Dublin Government to seek to amend Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution creates a new situation in which we should be prepared to offer the Republic some say in the government of the North, even though this would lay us open to accusations of a sell-out. Personally, I think we must view the latest Irish demarche with some scepticism. I understand that it has not been endorsed by the full Cabinet and I am very doubtful whether FitzGerald, in the face of Haughey's presumed opposition in the necessary referendum, can in fact deliver an amendment to the Constitution in return for any quid pro quo which we could offer.

4. To avoid being out-manoeuvred, and conceding a number of items which we had represented as intrinsically worthwhile and would therefore find it hard to go back on, I believe that we shall have to negotiate in two stages. In the first stage we should be prepared to offer certain things which we would regard as desirable anyway, and which would be unlikely to provoke a violent Unionist

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reaction. These would consist of practical measures of co-operation in the security field, which are now being examined by my officials. At the same time we would be pursuing attempts to involve both the SDLP and the Unionists in a scheme of government in the North.

5. We would reserve for a second stage of discussion various possibilities which would be ventilated openly only if the Irish showed themselves able, as well as willing, to amend their Constitution. Most of these possibilities are considered in Peter Utley's note to you. They would include a study of possible harmonisation of the criminal law; improved means of enabling the views of the minority in the North to be expressed; and various symbolic measures to recognise the Nationalists' cultural identity.

6. I agree with Sir Robert Armstrong that we now need to explore Irish thinking and discover what their minimum demand is likely to be in terms of political involvement in the North as a quid pro quo for amending their Constitution. But I think we also need to be clear what our own bottom line would be in this second "political" stage of the operation. I do not myself believe that we could accept anything like the concept of joint authority envisaged in the Nally counter-proposal. I do not see how we could, consistently with retaining sovereignty, accept "shared responsibility between HMG and Dublin" (in the words of the paper) for Government functions or the appointment of members of an Executive. Admittedly, "sovereignty" is open to shades of interpretation; but we have to consider not only what we might judge to be acceptable but also Unionist perceptions. The most I believe we could contemplate would be a consultative role for the Republic, offering influence rather than shared authority. This might be exercised through a Joint Council, meeting at Ministerial and official levels, which would discuss such matters as arrangements in the security field, North/South economic co-operation, as well as the scope for possible measures to reassure the Nationalist minority. Even this would be strongly criticised by the Unionists as a resurrection of the Sunningdale Council of Ireland; but it might just be acceptable if the Irish had amended their Constitution to remove the territorial claim to the North. Consultation would amount to less than shared responsibility, but



would still be feared as a thin end of the wedge.

7. Whether this role would be seen in Dublin as an acceptable quid pro quo for action on the constitution and whether, therefore, it would be sufficient to persuade the SDLP to participate in devolved government in the North would depend very much on how Dublin thought the role might be ~~devolved~~^{developed} once there was an Irish foot in the door. This can only be tested in negotiations. In any case, we shall have to use every means to encourage the SDLP to take part in the government of the Province.

8. Further negotiations with the Irish Government are bound to take time. Meanwhile the speech for the Government in the debate on the Forum Report early in July will have to develop the initial response I made when the Report was published and indicate how the Government sees the way forward. The debate will be no occasion for detailed proposals but it would be wrong to allow the impression that the initiative rests entirely with the Irish and the Forum Report. The balance between rejecting the three models canvassed in the Report and showing willingness to consider new ideas which meet our criteria of consent and are likely to be of practical benefit to the people of Northern Ireland is a delicate one. The Irish Government have emphasised the importance they attach to the principles and realities section of the Report. There is some common ground there, but there would be advantage in setting out our own position clearly. Moreover, a statement of HMG's general policy towards Northern Ireland would be helpful if we want to move on to some form of joint declaration, as favoured by the Irish as a basis for more detailed discussion. This would also give an opportunity to say something about the sort of government we think might be established in Northern Ireland. If you are in general agreement with this, you may wish to give the Taoiseach when you see him at Fontainebleau on 25 June some indication of the line we shall be taking in the debate.

9. I am copying this minute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and Sir Robert Armstrong.