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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

24 February 1986

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Dear Charles,

Northern Ireland

The Foreign Secretary has been studying over the weekend the records of and briefing for the several meetings on Ireland held last week. In particular he has seen the note on the Prime Minister's meeting contained in your letter of 20 February to Jim Daniell and the draft Speaking Note for the Prime Minister's use enclosed with Christopher Mallaby's letter to you of 21 February. *- meeting folder?*

Sir Geoffrey Howe notes that it is the intention that the Prime Minister, while making it clear to Mr Molyneux and Dr Paisley that there can be no question of renegeing in any way on the Anglo-Irish Agreement, should seek to engage them in a dialogue on the basis of proposals to consult them systematically about the proceedings of the Inter-Governmental Conference (IGC) and to discuss with them possible forms of devolution for Northern Ireland which would be acceptable to both communities there.

Sir Geoffrey agrees that it is important that their meeting with the Prime Minister should, if possible, not have the effect of driving the Unionists further into their own corner - especially if Mr Molyneux and Dr Paisley are themselves looking for some way to avoid a head-on confrontation with the Government, as we think may possibly be the case. He therefore agrees that it would be right to offer them some form of systematic consultation about the proceedings of the IGC (although he thinks we should avoid committing ourselves too precisely to the form such consultation might take) and to point them firmly in the direction of devolution.

Sir Geoffrey is however inclined to the view that the tone of the draft Speaking Note is rather more defensive than it needs to be; and, in particular, that any reference on our part to possible changes in the Agreement - or even to its operation - would be taken by the Unionists as a sign of weakness and thus encourage them to step up their demands that the Agreement should be abrogated or suspended. Consequently, although a reference to changes in the operation of the Agreement or to the scope and nature of the IGC's activities could be justified by reference to Article 11 of the Agreement, the Foreign Secretary thinks that such a reference would inevitably be presented by the Unionists as a retreat by the Government from the Agreement itself; and that it would therefore be unwise for the Prime

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Minister to make in any form the additional point contained in the last sentence of paragraph 12 of the Speaking Note.

Sir Geoffrey also believes that the Prime Minister should consider taking the opportunity of her meeting with Messrs Molyneux and Paisley to get firmly across to them the unreasonableness of the Unionist position and to nail some of the more serious distortions of the nature and purpose of the Agreement in which they have been indulging. He does not believe that the Official Unionists in particular will be prepared to go down the road to a UDI. That being so, they have in reality no alternative, provided the Government stands firm, to coming to terms with the Agreement as it stands. It should surely be our objective to help them to recognise this, while at the same time steering them towards devolution on a basis commanding widespread acceptance as the way to diminish the role of the Irish Government in Northern Ireland affairs and to give back to Unionist (and Nationalist) politicians their proper role in the political process. (In this connection the Prime Minister could usefully draw their attention to the statement by Mr John Hume on 20 February that, while power-sharing remains the SDLP's objective, he is willing to join in talks about devolution without pre-conditions.)

The Foreign Secretary is, of course, acutely aware of the difficulties involved in managing a meeting of this kind. Even so he hopes that an opportunity might arise of reminding the Unionists of the scale and duration of Britain's willingness to contribute to the maintenance of the Union: the British subsidy makes a major contribution to maintaining the standard of living and services in the Province. The Prime Minister could emphasise that the intention of the Agreement, and the effect of Article 1 (and of the preamble), is to strengthen the Union, not to weaken it. Any apparent weakening of the Union since Hillsborough has been the fault not of the Agreement, which consolidates it, but of the way in which Unionist politicians themselves have claimed that it is tantamount to joint authority, that it gives the Irish Government a decision-making role (which it expressly does not) or that it represents a sell-out of Northern Ireland to the South. Nor should we allow the Unionists' claim that the Agreement is a success for terrorist violence to go unanswered: Sir Geoffrey hopes that the Prime Minister will make it clear to them that the decision to go down the intergovernmental route was taken only because of Unionist reluctance, maintained and repeated over many years, to contemplate any governmental arrangements for Northern Ireland which would take effective account of the special position of the minority, historically and psychologically, in relation to the Republic. Noone is pretending that the SDLP were or are blameless: but it must be said that the unyielding attitude of the Unionists has helped to create the political impasse of recent years, and so closed off almost every option for an "internal" settlement. It is this which makes it virtually impossible to consult them in advance about the shape of the Agreement, since they made it crystal clear that their objective

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was to frustrate any Agreement with the Government of the Republic which would give that Government any sort of role in the Province, however circumscribed. As finally negotiated, the Agreement safeguards the Union; offers a way in which the legitimately elected political leaders of the Province can resume responsibility for a wide range of affairs; and holds out the prospect of ending the estrangement of constitutional Nationalists from the institutions of government, law and order in the Province, thus diminishing support for the men of violence.

Sir Geoffrey fully recognises that it is not the object of the meeting to seek a confrontation with the Unionists - and that for that reason the points to which he has drawn attention will need to be handled with care. He nevertheless considers it important that these points should be put firmly on record to them; that they should be left in no doubt that the Government believes the Agreement to be in the best long-term interests of all the people of Northern Ireland; and that we shall be resolute in resisting any attempts to undermine or destroy it. Sir Geoffrey believes that the Agreement is regarded by the great majority of people in the United Kingdom and at Westminster as an important achievement; and that provided we are not seen to be handling the Unionists with callousness or insensitivity, a policy of firmness in implementing and defending the Agreement will have widespread, cross-party support. The more the Unionists can be brought to recognise this the more difficult they will find it to justify unconstitutional resistance to it.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Private Secretaries to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Home Secretary, the Lord President, the Chief Whip and Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours ever,

Len Appleyard

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