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Prime Minister 3
Little progress to
Report from DH's
contacts with the
parties in the
North. CD 14/11

PRIME MINISTER

ANGLO-IRISH RELATIONS

Your Private Secretary's minute of 2 January to Sir Robert Armstrong asked for an account of any further contacts which I have had with the Northern Ireland political parties.

2. The Summit, and more particularly the parties' perception of it, had a major impact. The unionists saw it as vindicating their policies and strengthening the constitutional guarantee. For the SDLP, who had allowed themselves to nourish unrealistic hopes of what the Summit would achieve, and do not seem previously to have taken fully on board our rejection of the three specific options in the Forum report, the outcome was a blow, aggravated by what they saw as a "triumphalist" response from the majority. Many of the minority (and not only those active in political life) were affronted by the position we had adopted, and saw it as a rebuff to Dr FitzGerald.

3. I had separate conversations with Mr Molyneaux, Mr Paisley and Mr Hume between the Summit and Christmas. They all said that they were prepared to talk to each other outside the Assembly about the way forward. But none of them showed real determination to make progress.

4. For Jim Molyneaux and his Westminster colleagues the focus of attention remains the House of Commons. Their Party contains a substantial devolutionist element which lacks a prominent focus. Most of the UUP MPs are unenthusiastic about the Assembly and are happy with their Party's preponderance at Westminster. The Party is playing its part in the Assembly's Report Committee (which has the task of producing proposals for devolution) but Molyneaux is unlikely to give this a high priority.

5. The DUP have a strong commitment to the Assembly, and are

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more optimistic that the Report Committee can find a way forward. They profess to be ready to reach some accommodation with the minority, provided that it stops short of power-sharing. I have warned them that the Assembly could not go on indefinitely without moving beyond its scrutinising role. I hinted as much when I addressed the Assembly on 4 December.

6. John Hume doubts whether any unionist offer would give the nationalist community a real say in the central affairs of Northern Ireland: for the SDLP this remains essential if there is to be lasting accord between the two sides of the community. He recognised the need for talks with the unionist parties outside the Assembly. But he was unwilling to discuss any internal settlement which excluded Dublin. Privately he has shown interest in building on Anglo-Irish consultative procedures in ways which fall short of joint authority. But he is unlikely to want to make any significant move before the SDLP Party Conference on 25-27 January.

7. My pressure on the party leaders to talk to each other has led them into some manoeuvring for position. They are fencing with each other in public about the basis on which they would hold talks. The SDLP have reacted with extreme caution to a public invitation to talks from the DUP, saying that they would want the Forum Report to be the basis of discussions and describing the invitation (which is, no doubt, partly designed to outflank the UUP) as "a political stunt". Some discussions may, nevertheless, take place, and at least they all show some appreciation of the need to appear reasonable. But it is plain that following the Summit, neither unionist party sees an urgent need for serious discussion. The DUP will make every effort to keep the Assembly going but will not wish to jeopardise their May prospects.

8. In these circumstances there is a danger of desultory discussions being indefinitely prolonged. I am arranging further talks with the party leaders during the next week or two in order

[You are seeing him in Sunday]



to instil some sense of urgency. If the SDLP are to be brought into play, we shall have to offer them the prospect of some concrete development in Anglo-Irish relations, and, at the same time, to exert pressure on the unionists to stop resting on their laurels and adopt a genuinely conciliatory approach. Sinn Fein are looking forward to May and are certain to threaten the SDLP vote with the claim that the United Kingdom Government will never listen, except to violence. Although John Hume is outwardly sanguine about his prospects, it is not possible to estimate yet the damage which Sinn Fein might do to the SDLP at those elections and therefore to the prospects for political progress.

9. I have little doubt that my next round of talks will confirm that it is unlikely that the Parties will, by themselves, prove capable of working out acceptable arrangements for a new form of devolved government. If so, the right course will probably be for the Government to float, initially in private, ideas as to how devolution can be attained. We are at work on this. We must ensure that any proposals we put forward are demonstrably fair as well as workable. But unless the Government is prepared to take a hand the chances of achieving agreement are remote. Given the unionist rejection of power-sharing on the 1974 model and the SDLPs insistence that they cannot settle for less than they received at that time, the chances of success will be influenced by what arrangements, if any, we can agree with the Irish Government.

10. If the Parties were eventually to reject the suggestions which we offered, and to resist any pressure we might apply, it would be necessary to put devolution into cold storage. It would be difficult to do this unless we are first seen to have made a determined effort to secure agreement.

11. In those circumstances I would see little alternative to continuing with direct rule, but with some new features designed to reassure both sides of the community that the Government took full account, in practical ways, of their respective concerns. This would be a second best answer, but it may yet prove to be

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the only practicable way forward. I shall be ready, if necessary, to bring forward ideas about how this might be done.

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

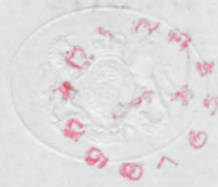
*Nigward
Private Secretary*

for DH
(Approved by the Secretary of State and signed in his absence in Belfast)

14 January 1985

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14 JAN 1955



IRELAND: Situation: Pt 19.

