

SECRET AND PERSONAL



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10 DOWNING STREET

11 February, 1985

From the Private Secretary

NORTHERN IRELAND: THE POSITION OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES

The Prime Minister has read with interest the Northern Ireland Secretary's minute of 8 February summarising the upshot of his contacts with the Northern Ireland political parties. She has noted in particular his recommendation that we should avoid the use of the descriptions "power-sharing" and "majority rule" in describing our own ideas.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Len Appleyard (Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary) and to Richard Hatfield (Cabinet Office).

(C.D. Powell)

J. Daniell, Esq.,
Northern Ireland Office

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Prime Minister
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Prime Minister

NORTHERN IRELAND: THE POSITION OF THE POLITICAL PARTIES

1. I reported to you in my minute of 14 January on the contacts I had had since the last Anglo-Irish Summit with the Northern Ireland political parties. Since then, you have had your own meeting with John Hume, and I have had further talks with Mr Molyneaux, Mr Paisley, Mr Hume and Mr Cushnahan; and the SDLP has held its Annual Conference.

2. Although the Conference left Mr Hume with some room for manoeuvre, the basic position in which he emerged from it was that any discussions with unionist parties would have to take account of the "realities" in the Forum Report, and that the SDLP was not interested in an internal settlement that was not accompanied by some Irish dimension. This was not too bad, though it was clear that Mr Hume was in no hurry. But we now have Mr Hume's declared intention to talk to the PIRA Army Council, and the unionists' angry and predictable reaction to it. The already fragile prospect of the parties coming to some agreement has been set back at least until Mr Hume makes it clear that he has abandoned his plan or, if he pursues it, the affair has receded a little into history.

3. It is difficult to judge whether Mr Hume has blundered into his present position (which has clearly displeased the Taoiseach) or whether it is a calculated manoeuvre. I think it may well have been calculated to provoke the sort of unionist reactions we have had, and so to relieve the SDLP of unwelcome pressure to enter into constructive dialogue with them. When he attacks the IRA for violence and is himself attacked by Mr Paisley, Mr Hume basks in the local headlines and has the best of both worlds. Handling an actual meeting with the IRA and the aftermath will be more tricky for him.



4. A factor in all the parties' minds is of course that the Northern Ireland district council elections are due in mid-May. The elections are more important than the councils. Within the unionist camp the parties will be manoeuvring for position vis a vis each other; the SDLP's priority will be to outsmart Sinn Fein; and none of the parties will want to adopt a posture, either in relation to an internal settlement or to Anglo-Irish affairs, which loses them votes. Adding this to the setback caused by Mr Hume's flirtation with PIRA, it seems increasingly unlikely that any substantial progress will be made among the parties within the next three months. Nor does the Assembly's Report Committee seem likely to break the deadlock.

5. But it is not all gloom. Before Mr Hume issued his challenge to PIRA, I was edging the parties towards serious "talks about talks" and had found them cautiously receptive to the idea that, if they could not produce their own devolution proposals (which remains my preference), we might float some tentative ideas of our own, perhaps employing a trusted intermediary to sound the parties' views on them. It has also been encouraging, in view of Mr Hume's continued insistence on an Irish dimension, that Mr Molyneux - although his utterances on the point have not been consistent - has acknowledged the possible value of some machinery through which the Dublin voice could be heard. There is, in short, a base from which I may be able to make progress when the time is right, but I may well have to play a more positive role than would have been necessary if the parties had found some way of coming together. My hope would be that if we seem likely to reach some agreement with Dublin on the lines of our present proposal, Mr Hume will become less inhibited about internal talks and the unionists will in turn be ready to turn some of their general utterances into practical proposals.

6. In the present atmosphere, the question of what ideas I might float with the parties has become a little academic. However, to pick up the enquiry in your Private Secretary's minute of 28 January to Sir Robert Armstrong, we are looking for some form of devolved government which will satisfy the

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test in the Northern Ireland Act 1982 of "widespread acceptance throughout the community". Given that the unionists are never likely to agree to the revival of a power-sharing executive on the 1974 model, and that power-sharing (linked to some Irish dimension) remains the SDLP's bottom line, I believe that we need to explore an arrangement under which some, but not all, of the powers which were exercised by the old Stormont Government would be returned to Heads of Departments appointed on an agreed basis by the Northern Ireland Assembly, with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland co-ordinating, in an informal way, the responsibility for devolved and non-devolved functions. Such a scheme is catered for by the 1982 Act under which all or some of the Northern Departments may be devolved except that, if there is partial devolution, the Department of Finance and Personnel must remain my responsibility. The Act provides that, if there is partial devolution, there can be no Northern Ireland Executive; but although it is silent about how co-ordination between the devolved and non-devolved functions is to be achieved, it has always been apparent that I would have to hold the ring in some way, if only to deal with budgetary matters. It was an arrangement of this kind to which our delegation tentatively referred in the Dublin talks in January. That is not the only possible way forward, but it is probably the most hopeful. I would of course consult you if we reached the stage where a definite agreement seemed within reach; we are some way from that.

7. I think there is advantage in avoiding the use of the descriptions "power-sharing" (objectionable to unionists) or "majority rule" (objectionable to nationalists) in describing any of our own ideas.

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

8 February 1985

D.H.
(Approved by the Secretary of State and signed in his absence)

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