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Northern Ireland: Meeting of Ministers on 5 June

The purpose of your meeting after Cabinet on 5 June will be to consider the future of the Northern Ireland Assembly and also the handling of the draft Order to renew the provisions for direct rule before they expire on 16 July.

2. The intention of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to dissolve the Assembly has already been discussed in the media. There seems to be wide recognition that the Government cannot stand aside indefinitely while the Assembly does not carry out its statutory function of scrutinising legislation but does carry out the inappropriate function of criticising the Anglo-Irish Agreement. On public expenditure grounds alone, the case for suspension looks strong. It would be important, in announcing such a decision, to emphasise the point in paragraph 4 of the Secretary of State's undated minute that new elections to the Assembly and its resuscitation could be arranged at any time on the basis of a further Order in Council.

3. Direct rule has to be renewed annually. The requisite Order is being laid this week. The Secretary of State must be right that it would be best to have this Order and the one on the Assembly debated in Parliament before the height of the marching season in July.

4. Your meeting will also provide an opportunity for a discussion on some wider aspects of policy on Northern Ireland. Our present policy is that we are firmly maintaining our determination to implement the Anglo-Irish Agreement; we are implementing it sensitively; and we are keeping open our offer of



talks, or initially talks about talks, with unionist leaders on devolution, on new methods of consultation between unionists and the Government and on the handling of Northern Ireland business at Westminster. When you saw Messrs Molyneux and Paisley on 25 February, you also offered consultations about the future of the Northern Ireland Assembly; suspension of the Assembly on the basis suggested above would not rule out talks on this with unionist leaders, since we would explicitly keep open the option of resuscitating the Assembly. While the Secretary of State has continued to explain our policy in public, other Cabinet Ministers have not done so recently. There could be some danger of creating an impression that the Government are giving less priority to the success of the Anglo-Irish Agreement than formerly, or just letting things drift.

5. The attached article from The Times of 29 May suggests that the Northern Ireland Office may be attracted to ideas for "integrating" Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom and giving less priority to "devolution". It appears that the Secretary of State is toying with ideas in this direction, though I believe his officials are sceptical about them: greater integration would be unwelcome both to the Democratic Unionist Party and to the nationalists. Integration is one of the ideas which has gained currency in the Official Unionist Party as its members cast around for new policies in the wake of the Anglo-Irish Agreement; just as in the Democratic Unionist Party the opposite concept of Northern Irish independence in some form is being bandied about. Integration is an elastic concept. It might theoretically be possible to combine a continued search for devolution with changes in the handling of Northern Ireland business at Westminster which would reduce the differences between the handling of that business and of business concerning the rest of the United Kingdom, and thus could be described as increasing the integration of the Province into the United Kingdom.



6. You could take the opportunity of your meeting to ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to give colleagues his views on such questions as -

a. The prospects in the marching season. Does the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland agree that the Government should not be inactive during that period but should continue energetically to explain its policy? Has the time come for a speech by yourself or the Lord President?

b. What is meant by greater integration? Presumably the Government could not support this idea in any form which went against the goal of devolution.

c. How are things going in the Intergovernmental Conference with the Irish Republic? (The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland may seek colleagues' support for his resistance to Irish pressure for three-judge - not mixed - courts in Northern Ireland. The Lord Chancellor and the Attorney General share his dislike of the idea.)

7. You might also wish to ask the Secretary of State to consider, and perhaps work up, the following new idea.

Particularly if the Assembly is to be put into deep freeze, to bridge the gap until a round table conference on devolution could be called, could it help to establish a "Council of Northern Ireland"? This might be an advisory body, with membership in proportion for instance to the votes received by the constitutional parties at the last General Election. The individual member might be nominated for an initial period of one year by the political parties. The Council would discuss current issues and also future developments, such as moves towards devolution, with the Secretary of State. The launching of such an idea, even without the actual establishment of the Council, would at least provide a focus for attention during the summer.

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In the autumn, the Government could consider whether to establish a Council and begin to call meetings even if the unionists refused to attend.

MS

for

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CONQUEROR

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Now a whiff of integration

George Brock analyses the change in government thinking on Ulster

Ever since the first Unionist protests against the Hillsborough agreement six months ago, the government has appeared likely to offer a political concession to buy off the outrage. Some outline of its thinking can now be seen.

Sales talk from Mrs Thatcher and Tom King, the Northern Ireland Secretary, presented Hillsborough as a "twin-track" strategy. Greater cooperation and consultation with Dublin would be balanced by a renewed search for a devolved provincial government shared between Unionist and nationalist politicians.

The second of these two tracks soon vanished. By January, Mrs Thatcher was sounding impatient with talk of devolution. Unionist reaction apart, she was irritated by the unwillingness of John Hume, of the nationalist SDLP, to think in practical terms about devolutionary schemes until Unionist protest had been quelled. King has now confirmed that the Assembly, designed as a devolution vehicle but now operating as a Unionist anti-agreement soapbox, will not last long.

This is a major shift. British governments, Labour and Conservative, have made power-sharing a principal plank of strategy since Stormont was prorogued in 1972;

it has been promoted under a bewildering variety of labels, but they all represented essentially the same idea. Now the basic aim of British policy for the province is again up for debate.

Official Unionists have been divided for years over what they want from London. Until recently the party has been divisible into devolutionist and "integrationist" wings, the latter supporting the incorporation of Northern Ireland into the United Kingdom on the same basis as Wales or Scotland. Hillsborough has increased the Unionists' sense of isolation and vulnerability, and that has been a catalyst for rethinking.

Integration is now beginning to carry the day, at least inside the Official Unionist party; the Rev Ian Paisley's Democratic Unionists have never had much time for the idea. Moderate Unionist politicians, seeing hopes of devolution receding, are looking for a straightforward campaign theme which would channel protest in a direction which could not then be written off as purely destructive.

James Molyneaux, the OUP leader, has a recurrent motif in his

current speeches and statements about how British governments cannot deny Ulster "equality" of treatment, and has even taken to quoting Labour party spokesmen to this effect.

Noises from the Northern Ireland Office suggest that its ministers are waiting on events: there is the summer marching season to be survived first and the Unionist parties have to clear up what they want before talking of any value can take place. But they are already leaning towards some gentle integrationist moves.

The key elements of what the government may eventually propose are that such moves can be made compatible with the existence and operation of the Hillsborough agreement and that they do not lock governments into either "full" integration or irrevocably close off other options, such as devolution, should the prospects improve. (This is not to say that any such moves will be popular with Dublin). Complete integration is anyway beyond the range of political possibility; apart from destroying Hillsborough and initiating a likely upsurge of

terrorism, its fullest version would involve mainland political parties organizing inside Northern Ireland — hardly likely now or in the foreseeable future.

But there are steps well short of this which might satisfy the government's aim of persuading the Unionists to live alongside the agreement and those Unionist politicians who do not want the initiative inside their own community to pass to those who want to bring down the agreement by action on the streets. Legislation covering Northern Ireland is currently subject to minimal scrutiny in Parliament and there are a variety of constitutional mechanisms which the government could use to upgrade monitoring and amendment by the province's MPs and bring the practice closer to that covering Wales and Scotland.

Further down the road would lie enhanced local government powers, but considering the past history of local councils, and the chaos at the moment, this would be very much more controversial. The government has an opportunity to thus amend direct rule when Parliament renews it at the end of June, but any action may well have to wait until the autumn.