

PRIME MINISTERNORTHERN IRELAND

You are to have a meeting immediately after Cabinet tomorrow to consider the Northern Ireland Secretary's recent minute proposing dissolution of the Northern Ireland Assembly. You also want to discuss the related question of renewal of the Northern Ireland Act (1974). The Lord President, the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Lord Privy Seal, the Defence Secretary and the Chief Whip will be present.

Mr King wants a private word with you first. I suggest that you slip out into my office,

General

You might start by asking Mr King to give a general assessment of the situation in Northern Ireland and of how he sees the way forward. Some of your colleagues feel that he is playing his cards unnecessarily close to his chest (I know you don't agree).

Northern Ireland Assembly

Mr King argues that:

- the Assembly is refusing to carry out its statutory functions;
- the Unionists would continue to behave the same way if the Assembly were re-elected in October;
- that the SDLP would probably not participate in the elections in such circumstances.

He therefore proposes that an Order in Council be laid in June for dissolution. There would be hostile demonstrations by Unionists and a tendency to see the decision as marking the

end of the Government's commitment to devolved administration in Ulster. But new elections could be held at any time of the Government's choosing.

Sir G Howe worries that the decision will be seen as a negative one and a signal that the Government's Northern Ireland policies have run into a cul-de-sac. He wants to know more about Mr King's plans to give a more positive aspect to those policies, so that the decision on the Assembly can be placed in context.

Points which you will want to consider are:-

- (i) what are the real consequences of allowing the Assembly to continue, and hold new elections in October? Are its antics just a pin-prick or is it doing serious damage? Are not any problems outweighed by the advantages of giving Unionist opinion an outlet? Are people in mainland Britain really aware of what the Assembly is doing?
- (ii) will not a decision to dissolve actually take pressure off the SDLP to co-operate? What are we doing to get them to take part in elections?
- (iii) if we decide to abolish the Assembly, what can we offer the Unionists in compensation to make them more co-operative? (see also below).
- (iv) if a decision is taken to dissolve, what is the best timing? How will it be received by Government backbenchers?
- (v) should a detailed line to take, presenting the decision in the most positive light possible, be drawn up?

Northern Ireland Act 1974

You will want to judge how much to reveal about your discussions on this subject. You may find a number of your colleagues concerned about the increasing talk of integration. Any decision to allow the Northern Ireland Act (1974) to lapse would require a new form of administration and new legislative arrangements for Northern Ireland which would need very careful preparation.

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CDP.

Charles Powell

4 June 1986