

PRIME MINISTERCABINET: NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS

The note by Sir Robert Armstrong suggests that you might introduce the discussion briefly yourself. You will no doubt want to do so in a balanced way. We have not been able to achieve everything we want. The Irish Government have declined to repeal Articles 2 and 3 of their Constitution. The value of improved security cooperation no longer looks as clear cut as it did. We have no firm commitment from the SDLP to participate in moves towards devolved local government. The risk of misunderstanding between us and the Irish Government over the agreement will be quite high: they will claim that it gives them more than it really does: we are inhibited from spelling out publicly how little it gives them. The key factor to emphasise above all is that decisions about Northern Ireland remain the responsibility of HMG. On the positive side, the agreement concedes nothing significant and is an honest attempt to improve the present situation. It may be better to try and to fail than not to try at all. Unionist agitation so far is rather less than we might have expected. (You could refer to your meeting with Mr Molyneux and Dr Paisley today.) Above all, failure to go ahead now would be a great disappointment to the Americans. Members of Cabinet will want to decide how the balance of advantage looks to them but you are convinced that it is on balance right to go ahead.

The Northern Ireland Secretary has raised an important point which is how we deal with questions from the press and from Unionists if Cabinet does reach agreement tomorrow. We shall no longer be able to say honestly that negotiations are still in progress. It might be better to avoid a formal decision in Cabinet this week and put it back on the Agenda for 7 or even 14 November for final decision so that we could truthfully say that no decisions have yet been reached

C.D.P.  
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30 October 1985