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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

12 December, 1985.

MEETING WITH NORTHERN IRELAND CHURCH LEADERS

The Prime Minister had a talk this evening with the Moderator of the Presbyterian Church and the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland. They were accompanied respectively by the Reverend Simpson, General Secretary, and the Reverend Eyre, Secretary. The Northern Ireland Secretary was also present.

The discussion does not warrant a full record, and my letter will deal only with the main points raised. The tone of the meeting was restrained and rather sorrowful.

The Church Leaders said they could not conceal the very deep feeling of resentment among the Unionist Community about the Agreement. They stressed that they were urging their congregations to react to the Anglo-Irish Agreement by peaceful and constitutional means. They did not expect a repeat of the violence of 1969. Rather the Unionist reaction was one of numbed shock. While the Agreement helped resolve some of the injustices felt by the minority in Northern Ireland, it offered few advantages for the majority. In some ways it was worse than Sunningdale because representatives of a foreign government would be actually sitting in Stormont. Something must be done to provide reassurance to the Unionist community. The most important single step would be practical measures to restore devolved government and to bring the SDLP to play their part. They would be stressing this latter point to Dr. Fitzgerald. Unfortunately the Agreement provided the SDLP with little incentive to work for devolution; they would prefer to have Dublin looking after their interests through the Intergovernmental Conference. Particular suggestions which they made were:

- (i) the Assembly should be given additional powers as a first step towards devolution. This was the most important single step which the Government could take;
- (ii) reassurance should be given that mixed courts would not be introduced;
- (iii) the government should avoid announcing decisions - even if taken by HMG or the Northern Ireland authorities

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alone - immediately after meetings of the Intergovernmental Conference;

(iv) special attention should be paid to reassuring the business community;

(v) the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the SDLP leadership should be persuaded to come out with statements in support of the police and security forces;

(vi) we should impress upon the Dublin Government the damage which was done by some of their public statements about the Agreement, which contradicted those of HMG. This only increased confusion among the Unionists;

(vii) while it would be difficult for the Prime Minister to visit Belfast at present, she might do a phone-in programme on the radio. This should be in the evening when working men were at home.

(viii) the government should adopt a policy of pulling down notorious complexes such as the Divis flats, and should rescind cuts in social services in Northern Ireland.

In their concluding remarks both the Moderator and the President were pessimistic. The Moderator concluded that the terms of the Anglo-Irish Agreement would continue to present great problems. He could see little hope of a return to normality unless the Agreement was renegotiated. The President remarked that the Government would never be able to carry the heart of the Unionist people of Northern Ireland with them.

The Prime Minister acknowledged that the reaction among the Unionist community had been stronger than we had foreseen. She had been disappointed. The Government had deliberately avoided some of the pitfalls of Sunningdale such as power-sharing and a Council of Ireland. She and the whole Government wished Northern Ireland to remain part of the United Kingdom. We shared the aim of devolved government in a form acceptable to both communities, and the Agreement committed the Irish Government to support this. She accepted that the SDLP should be encouraged to be more positive towards this. She would like to see the SDLP in the Assembly. We would pay careful attention to the communique issued after meetings of the Intergovernmental Conference. The Government was always ready to listen to constructive suggestions and approaches from the Unionist community. She would be happy to do a radio phone-in programme. In conclusion, she could not accept the pessimism of the Church Leaders. She was determined to implement the Agreement and believed that moderate Unionists could be brought eventually to see the advantages which it offered them. She hoped that Church Leaders would encourage this.

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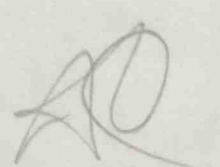
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I am copying this letter to Colin Budd (Foreign and Commonwealth Office) and Michael Stark (Cabinet Office).

C.D. Powell

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Northern Ireland Office.

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THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN IRELAND

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From the Clerk of the General Assembly and General Secretary
The Very Rev. Thomas J. Simpson, M.A., LL.B., Dip. Ed., D.D.

17th December, 1985.
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Dear Prime Minister,

On behalf of the Presbyterian and Methodist Church leaders I wish to thank you sincerely for receiving us so graciously on Thursday, 12th December.

We appreciate your willingness to meet us and we are reporting on our visit to our various Church Committees.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'T. J. Simpson'.

The Rt.Hon. Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, M.P.,
Prime Minister,
10 Downing Street,
LONDON, SW1