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PRIME MINISTER

Northern Ireland

I attended the annual conference of the British-Irish Association at Oxford this weekend. This minute summarises my main impressions, which may be of interest as background for the meeting of Ministers about policy on Northern Ireland which the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has proposed for this week.

2. The BIA Conference brought together a wide range of people from the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic, including Mr John Cushnahan, the leader of the Alliance Party, and Mr John Hume and another representative of the SDLP; but both the Unionist Parties stayed away. Nonetheless, much of the discussion centred on the reactions of the unionists to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and their views were well represented by sympathisers among academics and journalists. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland made a speech in which he stressed the Government's determination to stand by the Agreement and the importance of security co-operation with the Republic, and urged all concerned to move towards devolution.

3. The general view among participants except unionist sympathisers was that the Anglo-Irish Agreement was brave and ingenious. The stalemate in political developments in Northern Ireland has been broken ("whatever happens, things will never be the same again in Northern Ireland"), but major new risks had also been created. The general view was that the unionists would do well numerically in the by-elections on 23 January, although they might possibly lose one of the 15 seats being contested. There was considerable anxiety that they had no

idea, and had given very little thought to, what to do after the by-elections. They seemed to have four possible courses: to resort to violence, which most participants in the Conference thought unlikely on a wide scale; to make a move towards independence for Ulster, which was thought by nearly all present to be a crazy idea but not on those grounds necessarily impossible; to acquiesce gradually and grudgingly in the Agreement; or to move towards devolution. The relationship in the Agreement between devolution and the scope of the Intergovernmental Conference was fully explained, and I think generally understood. The best hope was widely thought to be that, in the period between now and the start of the marching season in July, unionists might come to explore the option of devolution. This was thought to be the most logical, and perhaps most likely, course for the unionists to take, since it would return a measure of responsibility to parties in Northern Ireland and reduce the role of the Intergovernmental Conference and thus the involvement of the Irish Government in the affairs of Northern Ireland. Mr Hume, speaking for the SDLP, was for the most part pretty negative, but he did say that he would like to talk to the unionists soon after the by-elections, to work out with them arrangements for devolution, and to present those arrangements in the campaign for Assembly elections in the Autumn, whereafter the SDLP would enter the Assembly. There was, however, no serious discussion of the key question whether there was any possibility of arrangements being devised for devolution which could satisfy both the unionists and the SDLP.

4. There was wide agreement that the British and Irish Governments should work for unionist acquiescence in the Agreement, particularly by producing results from the Intergovernmental Conference in the field of security, and should promote devolution, not least by pressure on the SDLP. Many speakers, including some from the Republic, followed the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in urging the SDLP

towards devolution and in calling on them not only to express clear support for the RUC but to encourage nationalists to join it. The SDLP response was very cautious.

5. There was considerable interest in the idea of an Anglo-Irish Inter-Parliamentary body; Mr Michael Mates MP described his Early Day Motion and his proposal for a Select Committee of the House of Commons to work out detailed proposals for such a body. But there was no agreement on whether such a body should include members of the Northern Ireland Assembly as well as of the Parliaments in Dublin and Westminster, or on whether it should discuss all Anglo-Irish matters or only those concerned directly with the Agreement. Some British MPs displayed interest in giving such a body powers similar to those of Select Committees in relation to the work of the Intergovernmental Conference, rather than making it merely a deliberative forum.

6. My general feeling from the Conference was that, while the situation in Northern Ireland is tense and may well get more so, there is a reasonable chance that, by firmly sticking to the Agreement, the Government can in time secure through it an improvement in the overall situation in Northern Ireland. I believe that the key lies in reiterating the Government's unswerving and irreversible commitment to the Agreement and in promoting acquiescence among unionists. One of the keys to promoting acquiescence lies in achieving results in the field of security from the Intergovernmental Conference, and we shall need to keep up our pressure on the Irish Government on that. But it was impressed on me that the Government must above all make it clear that the Agreement could not be moved or destroyed. The unionist politicians remember that they destroyed Sunningdale, but they are not convinced that they can succeed again this time. If they saw any sign that Ministers were wavering on the Agreement, they would scintillate the hope of

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reversing the Government's policy and would redouble their efforts to do so.

ReA

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