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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

30 January 1986

cc Master

Dear Jim,

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Prime Minister held a Meeting of Ministers this morning to consider the next steps in policy on Northern Ireland. The Lord President, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Northern Ireland Secretary, the Defence Secretary, the Lord Privy Seal and the Chief Whip were present.

The Northern Ireland Secretary said that the Unionists had not received in the by-elections the massive support and endorsement for rejection of the Anglo-Irish Agreement which they sought, although they had achieved a substantial majority. They seemed to have no clear idea of what they should do next. The meaning of a joint statement issued by Mr Molyneaux and Mr Paisley on 28 January was obscure, and both men had refused to answer questions on it. The Unionists' leaders clearly wanted a meeting with the Prime Minister but were posing unacceptable conditions for it. There might be advantage in the Prime Minister herself taking the initiative to offer such a meeting. It was not clear whether the Unionist party leaders would be prepared to come alone or would wish to bring all their elected members. In issuing an invitation, it would have to be made clear that the Government would not accept the conditions relating to the Anglo-Irish Agreement set out in the joint statement of 28 January.

The Foreign Secretary suggested that the main objective of a meeting with the party leaders would be to convince the Unionists that the Anglo-Irish Agreement was here to stay and that they must find ways to live with it. There must be no ambiguity about the basis for the meeting. There were a number of issues to be discussed such as the prospects for devolution, ways of keeping the Unionists informed about the proceedings of the intergovernmental conference and possible changes in the handling of Northern Ireland affairs at Westminster. At the same time we should need to demonstrate that the Government was pressing the SDLP to take an active part in the progress towards devolution, and urging the Irish Government to tone down their claims that the Anglo-Irish Agreement gave them direct involvement in the

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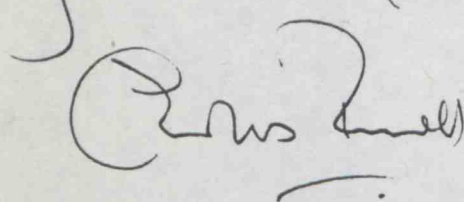
Government of Northern Ireland.

In discussion it was agreed that the primary objective must be the limited one of persuading the Unionist MPs to stay at Westminster. It seemed that they were divided on this with some of the Official Unionists wanting to stay and others less certain. To help them come down in favour of staying, we would need to be ready to discuss improved consultation with them within the framework of Parliament. The aim would be to lock them into discussion. There might also need to be some discussion of the Anglo-Irish Parliamentary tier, though given the Unionists' suspicions of this, we should not officiously strive to promote progress on it.

With Unionist opinion more widely, we should stress the positive aspects of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, for instance the successes achieved in the security field and the reduced vote for Sinn Fein. It would be important in parallel to keep up pressure on the Irish Government on ratification of the Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism. We might also press them to agree not to pursue further discussion of mixed courts; and re-open the question of possible amendment of Articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution (although we should not build up false hopes on this last point).

Summing up the discussion, the Prime Minister said that she would write to the Unionist party leaders offering an early meeting. The letter must make clear that the Government was not accepting the conditions set out in the Unionist joint statement of 28 January. The Cabinet Office should produce a draft for such a letter, together with a brief paper setting out the steps which it was agreed should be taken in relation to the Unionists, the SDLP and the Irish Government over the next few weeks.

I am copying this letter to Joan MacNaughton (Lord Presidents Office), Len Appleyard (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Stephen Boys Smith (Home Office), Richard Mottram (Ministry of Defence), David Morris (Lord Privy Seal's Office), and Murdo Maclean (Chief Whip's Office).

*Yours sincerely,*  


C D POWELL

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Northern Ireland Office