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PRIME MINISTER

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ANGLO-IRISH RELATIONS : NORTHERN IRELAND

I have read with interest Sir Robert Armstrong's account of his meeting with Mr Nally on 30 July. I thought it might be helpful if I let you have some comments before your meeting with Dr FitzGerald on 3 September.

2. The Irish ideas on policing are quite unrealistic. Although John Hume, as well as the Dublin Government, continues to advocate some form of separate police force for the Catholic areas, I am convinced that effective policing in Northern Ireland requires a single police force under the command of the Chief Constable and that we should not go beyond the ideas for joint policing in a border strip which we have already put forward. Apart from West Belfast, the areas of Catholic dominance are small and scattered and do not lend themselves to separate policing, even for "normal" police work. As Sir Robert Armstrong pointed out, unarmed policemen would be easy targets, especially the Catholics who would be seen as traitors by the IRA. Moreover, although the concept of a paramilitary anti-terrorist "third force" may make sense in some countries, it does not in Northern Ireland where terrorism is the dominant preoccupation of all policing: bank robberies and assaults, for example, are frequently perpetrated by terrorists. In any case, to be effective such a force would have to be based essentially on the RUC, which would do little to reduce the alienation of the nationalist majority. Any other solution - such as introducing a large contingent from the Garda - would be likely to provoke both a crisis in the RUC and a strong Protestant backlash.

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3. We all know that the RUC is not perfect and we should certainly do all we can to make it more acceptable to the minority; but in my view it would be a grave mistake to think of dismantling it and starting again. If the news that we were even contemplating such a ~~step~~ were ever to leak out it would have a devastating effect, both within the force and in the Protestant community. The fact is that the maintenance of law and order in Northern Ireland depends very heavily on the RUC, which has now taken over from the Army the primary responsibility for dealing with terrorism. In recent years Protestant terrorism has been largely eliminated, Republican terrorism contained and street violence reduced to occasional, comparatively small eruptions, although as the Galvin episode demonstrates it is still possible to mount a major disruption which the media can exploit to the full. However the improvements that have been made are hard-won and fragile, and should not be put at risk. If the RUC were broken up, or morale collapsed, the effectiveness of the campaign against terrorism would be drastically reduced. There would be an upsurge of violence - probably from both sides - which new and inexperienced police forces of the sort envisaged by the Irish could not possibly cope with. Our only possible recourse in such a situation would be heavier involvement by the British Army.

4. Rather surprisingly, the Irish do not seem to have mentioned the UDR: but since it is even more unpopular with the minority community than the RUC, they undoubtedly envisage that it too should be disbanded. In that case we should risk a violent reaction from the Unionists who, in the absence of the RUC in its present form, would see the UDR as their main protection. Once again, the gap would have to be filled by British Army units from the mainland, which would represent a very heavy commitment.

5. Quite apart from these practical considerations, I believe that there is a strong objection in principle to the control arrangements for the security forces proposed by the Irish. The police in Northern Ireland cannot be made "subordinate" to a Joint Security Commission in any operational sense.

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They must be under the command of the Chief Constable who is himself responsible to the Secretary of State. The latter can certainly consult a Joint Security Commission on which the Irish could be represented; but that does not seem to be what they have in mind. In spite of all our efforts to get across the message that consultation is the most that we are prepared to offer, the Irish still appear to be hankering for joint authority. I note that Mr Nally referred to the Irish Government having a "substantial authority" in the North and in the policing context to "some form of joint authority between the British and Irish Governments". Indeed, I understand _____ suggests that the Irish objective at the meeting on 30 July was to probe our thinking on security matters to see how far we are prepared to go towards joint authority. I hope that when you see Dr FitzGerald on 3 September you will be able finally to remove Irish illusions on this point. I have tried hard to do so with the Irish Ambassador.

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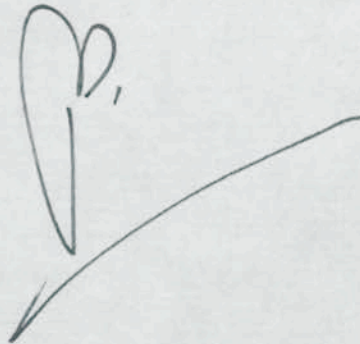
6. Security is the most important and politically sensitive issue in Northern Ireland, and one which impinges directly on sovereignty. By offering Dublin institutionalised consultation on a wide range of matters, including security, we already risk a Protestant reaction which may prevent Unionist participation in any system of devolved government in the North. If we were to go further, particularly in this sensitive area, the consequences could be very serious. The Irish, I recognise, see a restructuring of the police primarily as a political move; but for us security considerations must be paramount. In my view it would be extremely dangerous to move towards giving the Irish any form of joint authority on security matters in the hope that this would minimise their demands for a say in the broader political administration of Northern Ireland. There are things which can be done in the policing field to improve co-operation with the South and to reduce the alienation of the nationalist minority in the North; but they have got to be approached slowly and cautiously. I realise that the Irish want a dramatic gesture to justify the amendment of their constitution; but I think this has to be found in the general

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concept of institutionalised consultation (which would include policing), rather than in immediate and radical changes in security arrangements which could only be brought about gradually and after careful study, possibly in a Joint Security Commission. Above all, we should do nothing which would undermine the present effectiveness of the security forces.

7. I am copying this minute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and to Sir Robert Armstrong.



14 August 1984