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HCS/10/79

cc. PS/SOS L&B
Mr Brennan
Mr Stephens
Mr Chesterton
Mr Bell

PUS B&L

ANGLO-IRISH TALKS: SUBMISSION OF DRAFT AGREEMENT TO CABINET

1. Mr Brennan has copied to me his minute (DUS/L/736) of 25 October to you, covering a draft of a paper to Cabinet.
2. When I saw the earlier (Mallaby) draft it struck me as quite excessively bland, suggesting to Ministers that the conclusion of such an Agreement was unquestionably in the national interest. I very much agree with Mr Brennan's comment that, in doing so, it "played down the difficulties too much". Even the redraft, however, (while a considerable improvement) presents the main problems on the "down-side" as being those of initial reaction, with unionist opinion perhaps thereafter progressively reconciling itself to the new realities.
3. That is not my view of the situation. Although we are likely to go through a bumpy period in the months immediately following any Agreement, I am confident that we can see our way through these difficulties with resolution. My doubts about the Agreement (which have been tempered but not allayed by some recent progress in amending and clarifying sensitive points) are of quite another kind. They are first, that the Agreement will not deliver enough to the nationalists by way of radical change in the things they make a fuss about to secure (for example) their tacit support at least for the forces of law and order, but will nevertheless deeply alienate the unionists. Second, and fundamentally, that the institutionalisation of an Irish Government role as protector of minority interests is likely, in the longer term, to reinforce division rather than to facilitate reconciliation. Even from an Irish point of view, such an agreement sits very oddly alongside the classic aspiration to unite "Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter".

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4. We are in a position to let Ministers know how the draft Agreement strikes the British and Irish Governments who will be parties to it, and how the SDLP, who have been kept fully briefed by the Irish, may react. References to possible unionist reactions are more hypothetical. At this stage the only group of people with deep roots in Northern Ireland who have been able to see the text are myself and my senior colleagues. I do not think that the Cabinet should commit itself finally to an agreement without being aware that that group has expressed very serious reservations about the effect of such an Agreement. It is extraordinary, in my view, that we should have got to this stage in crucial negotiations about the future of Northern Ireland without those in the Cabinet and Foreign Offices who have been driving the negotiations forward knowing, or seeking to find out, what the views of senior colleagues in Northern Ireland are. Of course there are at issue here broad questions of national and international policy which those Offices are best placed to handle. But the Agreement is, in the last resort, about Northern Ireland, and although I appreciate the wish for secrecy, it has meant in practice a failure to draw adequately upon the accumulated experience available to Government. (See Merlyn Rees in "The Guardian" of 25 October and John Cole in "The Listener" of 24 October.)

5. I understand very well the arguments for some sort of accommodation with the Irish, and the momentum which the current negotiations have achieved by this late stage. But I would be failing in my duty to represent my views frankly if I were not to reiterate, before irreversible decisions are taken, that I do not accept that the Agreement as currently drafted is likely, over the long-run, to make things better rather than worse.

KPB

K P BLOOMFIELD
28 October 1985

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