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POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS GROUP

In response to your earlier invitation and to Mr Rickard's minute of 21 July I submit a draft paper on the current political scene in Northern Ireland. It is based on a draft by PAB and incorporates comments from Any necessary updating, as well as any amendments which others may have to suggest, can perhaps be considered at the PDG meeting now arranged for 28 July. I hope that without too much editing the paper can then serve as the first element of the strategy paper for Ministers commissioned by the PUS.

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PDG(86)3

THE CURRENT POLITICAL SCENE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1. Political developments in Northern Ireland have been dominated since 15 November by the Anglo-Irish Agreement and by concerted Unionist opposition to it. At the heart of that opposition lies the Unionist aim of removing their consent from all the institutions of Government in Northern Ireland, including District Councils, Area Boards and public bodies, in order to demonstrate that without their consent the Province is ungovernable. This 'constitutional' approach has been supported by more extreme loyalist elements and from time-to-time reinforced by street disorders and by explicit threats and actual demonstrations of violence against Roman Catholics, the RUC and prison officers.

Unionist Politicians

2. Although both Unionist parties are united in their opposition to the Agreement and in their determination to bring it to an end, they are far from agreed on the tactics to be employed. UUP members generally place a higher value on maintaining the Union and on observing the proprieties of constitutional and political opposition; some of them acknowledge, at least in private, that some sort of accommodation with the Irish (short of direct interference from Dublin in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland) may have to be reached in order to ensure the survival of the Union. The DUP on the other hand are prepared to use more extreme forms of opposition, which could put at risk the continued existence of the Union, if that is the price which has to be paid to avoid 'Dublin rule'.

3. This difference of outlook manifests itself in a difference of approach, with Paisley and the DUP prepared to go to greater lengths in attacking the Government and the Agreement, and Molyneaux and his party trailing along behind. On the dissolution of the Assembly - an event which is now generally being seen as having been inevitable - it was the DUP members (with only two UUP colleagues) who occupied the Chamber and had to be ejected

by the RUC. It was Paisley, without UUP support, who led the demonstration through Hillsborough in the small hours of 11 July; the RUC decision to allow Orangemen to march along Garvaghy Road in Portadown on 12 July was credited to pressure from the DUP and the Ulster Clubs although UUP leaders (wearing their Orange Order hats) were primarily responsible for the negotiations.

4. These propaganda achievements, coupled with the DUP's links with the Ulster Clubs and the Loyalist paramilitaries, have strengthened Paisley's position amongst more militant unionists. They have equally however provoked some consternation within the UUP, whose supporters traditionally eschew gimmicks and abhor violence, and who resent the perception of Molyneaux as Paisley's poodle. Distaste for DUP tactics may have encouraged the current of opinion among some UUP members favouring the reopening of some sort of dialogue with the Government.

Moderates

5. Church leaders of both communities and Alliance Party politicians have continued to preach moderation and, while not in many cases going so far as to endorse the Agreement, have represented the advantages of dialogue as a better way forward than confrontation. Although the media and many Unionist politicians have joined in condemning violence, there is little evident disposition among any of the elected politicians to respond constructively and publicly to the call for dialogue. Those business leaders who may be presumed to wish for peace and harmony have avoided entering the political arena.

SDLP

6. The SDLP were initially encouraged by the determination of the Government to resist Unionist pressures against the Agreement, but have recently experienced some set-backs. Although their performance in the 23 January by-elections was encouraging, recent District Council by-election results demonstrate that Sinn Fein support has held its own. The overwhelming vote against divorce in the Republic's referendum came as a blow to

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the SDLP, who had spoken in favour of change, and who now see nationalist aspirations to Irish unity receding still further into the future. The RUC decision on Orange marches in Portadown on 12 July came as a further shock to nationalists and was vigorously condemned by the SDLP. The party will therefore be keen to see tangible results soon from the Agreement which they can display to their community as the fruits of their labours.

Economic Situation

7. The economic situation is bleak and the prospects disturbing. Areas of traditional unionist dominance are now being hit, with a spate of recent redundancies in Carrickfergus and new concern over the prospects for Harland and Wolff in East Belfast. Since 15 November local Unionist politicians have paid little regard to the economic welfare of the Province. Peter Robinson, at no apparent cost to his standing locally, displayed very little interest in the attempts by Harland and Wolff to secure the AOR order, which was thought crucial to secure the company's future. He might nevertheless be able to use any further bad news over the Shipyard to demonstrate to his constituents that the Government was "playing the economic card" to try to force acceptance of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, and that the earlier expectation of a secure future for Harland and Wolff was the result of deliberate deception by the Government. More generally, economic decline (particularly in East Belfast) is more likely to inflame passions by adding to general discontent than to encourage moderation.

Prospects

8. The differences between the two Unionist parties are likely to grow, with the DUP reflecting the naked resentment of the Protestant working class community to the Agreement, and many of the sedate UUP members looking for ways forward. In the absence of any moderate Unionist leader - Molyneux represents rather than leads his party, and there is no more forceful successor in sight - the DUP (taking with it the more extreme UUP elements) is likely to emerge the stronger from any formal split, with consequent damage to the prospects of progress. Some of the more

extreme loyalist paramilitaries, freed from the current political constraints of the unionist pact, might exploit the opportunity by launching more widespread attacks on Roman Catholics. The Provisionals intend to launch a more vigorous campaign against the Agreement in the Autumn and PIRA will have no compunction about taking terrorist action, eg against Unionist (and SDLP) personalities, if opposition to the Agreement appears to be on the wane.

9. Early substantial talks between any of the parties are unlikely. The Charter Group led by Harry West has little real relevance, although there may be some active politicians prepared to engage in preliminary soundings for an eventual dialogue. John Hume is prepared to talk to Unionist leaders about devolution only on his own terms, and has said that SDLP participation in a future Assembly depends on agreement in advance on at least the principle of power-sharing. For the SDLP, the continuation of the Anglo-Irish Agreement is a sine qua non; for the Unionists, even if the Agreement continues in being, any talks must be outside its parameters. The possibility of talks with the Government at Ministerial level during 1986 is remote. It is possible that there will be no significant political movement in Northern Ireland before the next general election in either the Republic or the UK.