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10 February 1981

STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND, RT HON HUMPHREY ATKINS, MP

I have been concerned in the last few days about statements and actions on the part of people in Northern Ireland who claim to see a conspiracy or "sell out" in the programme of joint studies being undertaken by officials of the UK Government and the Republic of Ireland, following the agreement reached at the meeting between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach in Dublin on 8 December and in preparation for further discussion between them later this year.

I assure the people of Northern Ireland quite categorically that there is no such conspiracy or "sell out" or indeed any threat to the interests of Northern Ireland in these joint studies. The crucial point is this: the studies take place within, and do not question, the constitutional framework in which the position of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom cannot be changed without the consent of the people of the Province and of Parliament at Westminster.

The joint studies are an aspect of HMG's responsibility for the conduct of this country's relations with other governments, including that of the Republic of Ireland, one of our EC partners, in the best interests of the people of the United Kingdom as a whole, including those of Northern Ireland.

The undertaking of this programme of joint studies in no way implies any slackening of the Government's concern for the security of the Province. Quite the contrary. I assure all the people of Northern Ireland that their protection, against murder and violence and all forms of public disorder, from whatever quarter they arise, is and will remain the Government's overriding concern.

NOTE: This item was telephoned to City Offices last night.