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Meeting between SDLP and Mr. Prior on 22 October.

1. A general account of this meeting was given to the undersigned and to Mr. Burke by Hugh Logue on 23 October. The meeting involved several members of the SDLP (Hume, Mallon, McGrady, and Logue were mentioned) with officials only accompanying Prior. Prior in the course of a visit to Larne immediately before the meeting had had a rough encounter with some hardline Unionists and arrived 15 minutes late.
2. Logue commented that at various times in the discussion Mr. Prior seemed avid for flattery and appeared to react most favourably to praise and encouragement.
3. John Hume presented the results of the recent think-in by the SDLP at Carrigart. Mr. Prior seemed a little slow to take in their significance and some explanation of the SDLP's new position had to be given. Prior did not comment extensively and was reported to have said that in the final scenario envisaged by the SDLP they might very well accept majority rule in the six counties since they would have got everything else they wanted.
4. Prior appeared to recognise the need for political action but he seemed to express and to understand this matter in terms of tackling the Economic crisis, that is to say, his view seemed to be that a better political atmosphere would lead to economic re-construction and would be justified by that consideration. He differentiated between two types of Unionists whom he had met. The first type was the strident critic of the Government, demanding strong security action and political reassurance about the Union. The second type was the worried businessman, who Prior said was in no way different from the worried businessman of mainland Britain. The latter type of Unionist he said was very anxious for increased business and cooperation with the Republic.

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Prior evidently proposes to restore some functions to Local Government in Northern Ireland. He indicated that this did not include the areas of housing or education where discrimination had occurred in the past. His ideas in this regard were of course strongly criticised by the SDLP. It emerged that Prior saw this development as a quid-pro-quo to the Unionists for the Anglo-Irish Council. His thinking seemed to be that Unionist acquiescence in the AIC could be obtained by strengthening the District Councils. The SDLP expressed the strongest doubts about the viability of any bargain of that type.

6. Mr. Prior acknowledged that the AIC, although an East/West institution, would have a strong role in North/South cooperation. This cooperation would not, however, be institutionalised. He discussed with the SDLP the question of representation of Northern Ireland in the proceedings of the AIC but solely in terms of representation in a parliamentary forum. This discussion had not led to any precise reference to the attempted re-establishment of a devolved assembly in Northern Ireland, but the SDLP are aware that this option is certainly within the range of the ideas being considered in the Northern Ireland office. On this occasion, as indicated above, Mr. Prior confined himself to the suggested restoration of powers to District Councils.

7. Mr. Prior referred to the AIC and the related developments which he expected to result from it (Economic Cooperation, Northern Ireland representatives' involvement) as a "vehicle" for progress. This language suggested a gradualist approach. The SDLP spokesman made the point that such slight forward movement would in no way affect the political problem which was at the root of the Northern Ireland situation. It would amount in fact to containment, as practiced under Mason or Atkins. More would be required if political progress was to be even initiated.

8. Mr. Hume made a strong presentation to Prior stating that the quality of life in Northern Ireland had taken a further dramatic nose-dive in recent months. The graffiti were getting larger and more desperate, more derelict houses were to be seen and people's lives were increasingly dominated by fear, hatred and depression. The H-Blocks Hunger-Strike was perhaps the greatest single cause of this. Hume pointed out that the Secretary of State and his officials, residing in leafy Hollywood and Cultra, knew nothing of the appalling realities of life in any other part of Northern Ireland. This was the background against which a substantial new initiative on a different plane from anything attempted before should now be launched.

9. In general, the SDLP received the impression that the harsher realities were getting home to Mr. Prior. He seemed to be put off by abrasive encounters with Unionists, some of whom had criticised him sharply at the Conservative party conference, and also intensely disappointed by the reaction of Republican prisoners to his post-hunger-strike package of reforms. Here Mr. Prior seemed to think that he had done well and was distinctly hurt at the cold reaction he had received. Mr. Prior made it clear to his visitors that there would be no decisions taken or actions embarked upon until after the forthcoming summit meeting between the Taoiseach and Mrs. Thatcher.

Handwritten signature

D.M. Neligan

23 October, 1981