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Attitudes of Prime Minister Thatcher and British Government to Northern Ireland and related matters, emerging from Minister for Foreign Affairs meetings with Foreign Secretary Pym (24 January) and Northern Ireland Secretary Prior (1 February)

1. Messrs. Barry and Pym agreed on the benefits of a good and open personal relationship between Ministers in the two countries. Mr. Pym recalled that when the Taoiseach was Minister for Foreign Affairs and Mr. Pym was Northern Ireland Secretary, relations were good. He said he looked forward to meeting the Taoiseach at the European Council.

2. Mr. Pym referred to security as the most critical issue in Northern Ireland affairs. He said that the Assembly was there and would remain there and that the British Government regretted the SDLP position of non-participation. Mr. Prior made the same point with, as one might expect, much greater force and feeling. Mr. Pym agreed that politicians in the North had run out of ideas but referred to the Assembly as a place where they could at least meet. It was agreed at the Barry/Pym meeting that little could be done on the political front in an atmosphere of an impending Westminster election.

3. Mr. Prior started by suggesting that the general situation in Northern Ireland was better than it had been. The number of bombings was less than in the past and daily life had returned to a more normal state. Troop numbers had been substantially reduced. He said, however, that society there was more polarised than ever. As the discussion developed, Mr. Prior revealed marked feelings of frustration at the intractability of the problem and at the apparent obstacles to any identifiable avenues of advance.

4. Mr. Prior said that one of his objectives in setting up the Northern Ireland Assembly had been to provide a forum in which politicians could talk to each other. He considers this is now beginning to happen and pointed to contacts between the DUP and Alliance parties. He intends to keep the Assembly going at least until the British General Election. It could be implied from his approach that he would wish to see it continue beyond the General Election. Mr. Prior stressed that in accordance with the legislation setting up the Assembly there could be no devolution of powers until the necessary conditions (including widespread acceptance throughout the community) are met.

5. Mr. Prior wanted the SDLP to be involved in the Assembly. One proposal he was reconsidering was that which was rejected by all the parties except the SDLP in the run-up to the Assembly initiative - that he would become Chief Executive of a Northern Ireland Government and appoint four Ministers, one each from the SDLP, DUP, OUP and Alliance. This would not be a power-sharing Executive but power distributed by the Secretary of State. Mr. Prior was not prepared to move on this unless he was certain an undivided SDLP would come into the process.

6. In the context of a discussion about access for Provisional Sinn Fein Mr. Prior said the British could never refuse to see elected

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representatives at some level. They had decided to meet PSF on constituency but not on constitutional matters and then only when others are present. PSF had had one meeting with a junior Minister and representatives from the SDLP and Alliance had also been present. Mr. Prior claimed that their system would not allow them to "deliver" to the SDLP over PSF in constituency terms, but if he found any way he would do it.

7. The question of extradition was discussed. Mr. Prior expressed gratitude for the McGlinchey judgement. He acknowledged that the 1976 Criminal Law Jurisdiction (Amendment) Act was now working better. A concession from us on extradition would help allay the fear and suspicions of Unionists. Lord Gowrie said that while extradition was not an issue over which the British Government was incensed, it was something on which the public had strong views. He asked if there was anything that would make extradition negotiable for us.

8. In response to a question from the Minister about Mrs. Thatcher's attitudes, Mr. Prior said that she was basically a very strong Unionist, as Mr. Pym could also testify: in elaboration, he characterised her as an "emotional Unionist": Mr. Ian Gow, her Parliamentary Private Secretary, was described as a "rabid" and a "romantic" Unionist. Mr. Prior said that the Prime Minister was under the influence of Mr. Enoch Powell, whose intellect she enjoyed and who was very persuasive, so that Mrs. Thatcher found herself drawn to the Unionist side. In further exchanges, Mr. Prior said that she did not focus on the problem and probably wished it would go away.

18 March, 1983.

Copies to:

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2. Minister for Foreign Affairs
3. Secretary to the Government
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