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To:

NORTHERN IRELAND SITUATION

From:

Taoiseach,

Please see notes under from Messrs. Kirwan and Murray.

1. I think that the proposals for a "Council for a New Ireland" have a number of considerable dangers which should be taken into account by the Government before they reach any conclusion.

2. First, if the proposal is seen to get off the ground, in a high profile way, in Northern Ireland, as will be necessary, if the SDLP are to maximise its political benefits for them, then it will be attacked vigorously not only by Unionists but also, and particularly, by other parts of the Nationalist population there. These already comprise about 10% of the vote and, according to reports, are building up their strength and organisation. I am not sure what benefit would emerge eventually if these divisions were accentuated.

3. Similarly, divisions here could be aggravated. I can see arguments, increasingly bitter or increasingly irrelevant as circumstances dictate, developing on whether we should go for a federal or a unitary state, whether we should opt for a pluralist or a sectarian society, and on such nuts and bolts issues as finances, etc. for very little of which any preparation whatsoever has been done here, on a party or political basis. This area is a veritable minefield - as experience with, for instance, recent proposals & the Constitution Committee illustrated. It is, therefore, imperative, if any progress is to be made on the proposal for a "Council" that the most detailed and comprehensive understanding be reached as between the political parties here. This can only come from an initiative at your level. 1968

4. Thirdly, we cannot ignore the United Kingdom dimension. Already, Northern Ireland is supported by the British Treasury to the extent of £1 billion to £1.5 billion a year. There is no way any settlement whatsoever can be reached, without a continuance of this or some similar level of British subsidy. This is not simply selling birth rights for a mess of pottage. It is a matter of jobs and lives for hundreds of thousands of people. Similarly, the British participation in security, in Northern Ireland, is indispensable, certainly for the foreseeable future. On all this it would, I think, be a great mistake to take the words or attitudes of Mr. Prior as properly reflecting British attitudes. (He appeared recently to acquiesce in the suggestion for a Council). There is only one British Government

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authority on Northern Ireland. That is the Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher, who runs Northern Ireland policy, such as it is, with an iron hand.

5. Fourthly, on a totally practical level, I would say that the level of interest, among the general populace here, in Northern Ireland affairs now, is at a low ebb. In fact, the main interest is in availing of the 15% VAT rates for goods - as against the 23% VAT rates here, and, if possible, the far lower income tax rates obtaining in the North. An often forgotten priority of Northern policy here, is the necessity to get our own economy straight and attractive.

and 35%

6. From all this, I would suggest that -

- (i) as low a key approach as possible should be taken to the proposals. This may not suit the SDLP to the full, but it would be to the best advantage of this part of the country, and ultimately of Northern Ireland and of Anglo-Irish relations generally. For this reason, I would suggest that the proposed new organisation, if the Government should decide to follow that line, should be an all party organisation, rather than an organisation set up or organised by Government. Mr. Murray's comments at paragraph 6 of his note are particularly relevant here;
- (ii) the title and descriptive documentation should lay less emphasis on the "Irish" people. A major difficulty is to effect reconciliation between the "Irish" people and one million people in Northern Ireland whose allegiance is "British", nominally at any rate. This most complex of relationships cannot be solved if one of the basic assumptions is that the "Irish" element is predominant and always right;
- (iii) we should continue to work, quietly, and without publicity, towards a form of shared administration of Northern Ireland. This is the only way, in practice, in which the British will be persuaded to continue their subventions - and fade out their presence, while preserving peace in the area, and offering the possibility of a dual allegiance for its population.

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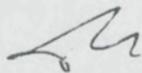
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7. On paragraph 7 of the Foreign Affairs Memorandum I agree with Mr. Murray that it is a matter for the Taoiseach as Head of Government and Party Leader to initiate any of the suggested discussions with political parties in the Oireachtas. The terms of reference of previous all Party Committees were settled following contacts between the parties themselves.

8. On the comparatively minor issue of the "encounter organisation" I would agree with Mr. Kirwan that this should, perhaps, best be left aside for the moment - certainly until, at least after you have met the Prime Minister. Our understanding with the Cabinet Secretary was that this issue would be dealt with, initially, at his level. If that understanding is to be changed, it would be better to do it, after prior consultation.



23rd February, 1983.