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Prime Minister

NORTHERN IRELAND: THE PRESENT POSITION

This note assesses the current political situation in Northern Ireland and our prospects for the future.

I start from the conviction that real progress can only come from within Northern Ireland; but we have the responsibility to provide a framework. To this end, we have succeeded in establishing the Assembly in Northern Ireland following our White Paper last April and the Northern Ireland Act 1982. We have shown that there is useful work for an Assembly and particularly its committees to do under Direct Rule. We have also established with the Assembly a framework for further political progress. The Democratic Unionist Party under Mr Paisley and the Alliance Party under Mr Napier are fully committed to making the Assembly work. The Official Unionist Party under Mr Molyneaux is less committed, but a substantial number of Official Unionists in Northern Ireland want the Assembly and up to now they have carried the day. All three parties have shown surprising flexibility in their alliances and attitudes, although both Unionist Parties remain firmly opposed to power sharing.

We have not so far succeeded in getting the Social Democratic and Labour Party under Mr Hume to join the Assembly. They have got themselves firmly on the abstentionist hook. They are looking to the Forum for a New Ireland - the Dublin-based initiative - to provide them with some political impetus for the rest of this year. Meanwhile Sinn Fein are working hard to consolidate their political support in Northern Ireland by a careful amalgamation of controlled terrorism and pavement politics. They represent as great a threat to the Irish Government as to the SDLP.

Subject to the security situation, there is unlikely to be much scope for movement before the General Election. We will see manoeuvring for position rather than major change. The Assembly will

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remain in being. The SDLP will continue to pin their hopes to the Forum. The Irish Government will do what they can to help the SDLP against Sinn Fein, but they will also want to develop cordial relations with the United Kingdom Government. These are also in our interests, both within Northern Ireland and in presenting our policies abroad.

Our main objective must be to put ourselves in the best position to make progress after the Election through continuing to look for effective ways of encouraging peace, stability and economic development in Northern Ireland. It is essential that we act positively on all these fronts. To fail to do so would have repercussions for the reputation of our Government both at home and abroad, and the consequences could not be contained within Northern Ireland.

Once the Election is out of the way there will be a period of re-assessment in the light of electoral strengths. But with our new Government and the FitzGerald Government continuing in the Republic, we should be able to build on the work of the Government over the last two years. We may have to wait for the Forum to be completed. But the likelihood is that little will come of that, except to reveal the unreality of a United Ireland and the differences among the participants. The SDLP and the Irish Government will then be looking round for another way forward. The United States and other Governments will also want to see progress.

Our aim should be to develop our policies, and not to promise any new and dramatic initiatives. To do so would only raise false expectations which are bound to be disappointed to our discredit. We have a good foundation in the Assembly and the 1982 Act. A number of options may present themselves. One that I believe holds some chance of success is to devolve four Departments (for example Social Services, Environment, Agriculture and Economic Development), one to each of the main parties. This would leave the Secretary of State and say one Minister with a considerable degree of control particularly over finance, but it would begin to give the Assembly real power and some legislative responsibility. It would avoid some of the difficulties of collective power sharing, and if

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accepted, would meet the criteria of widespread acceptance. It is a possibility which could be looked at alongside the slow but steady development of the Anglo-Irish Inter-Governmental Council. Much will depend on the line up of the Northern Ireland parties after a General Election, but this scenario is a possibility which holds more hope than any others at this moment; although we should continue to keep others in mind.

Although there are no easy answers, we have made some progress and should be guided by these considerations over the next few months.

I am copying this minute to Francis Pym.



J P

April 1983

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