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NORTHERN IRELAND POLITICAL REVIEW: 25 APRIL - 7 MAY 1984

A: INTRODUCTION

1. The main event of the period was the publication of the Report of the New Ireland Forum on 2 May. On 26 April, the Ulster Unionist Party launched a discussion paper entitled "The Way Forward" outlining its proposals for administrative devolution in Northern Ireland.

B: FORUM

2. The Report of the New Ireland Forum was published on 2 May. As expected, the Report came down in favour of establishing a unitary state embracing the whole of Ireland but also examined two other possible structural arrangements, a federal/confederal state and joint authority. Earlier chapters set out the nationalist perspective on the establishment of Northern Ireland and the current political scene and, in a section entitled "Framework for a New Ireland: Present Realities and Future Requirements" the participating parties sought to summarise their analysis of the problem. The Report concluded that the existing political framework in Northern Ireland had "failed to provide either peace, stability or reconciliation" and that the constitutional guarantee had the effect of "inhibiting the dialogue necessary for political progress". The Report rejected the use of violence as a means of achieving a solution and asserted that "the new Ireland which the Forum seeks can come about only through agreement": new political arrangements, according to the Report, would have to be "freely negotiated and agreed to by the people of the North and by the people of the South". Finally, the Report argued that, in a new

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Ireland, both civil and religious liberties and rights must be guaranteed and that there could be no discrimination on grounds of religious belief or affiliation.

3. Responding to the Report on 2 May, the Secretary of State, Mr. Prior, said that the Report's authors could not expect the Government to accept the nationalist interpretation of past events which the Report expressed, and described the Forum's account of the British position as one-sided and unacceptable. However he welcomed "important positive elements in the Report" particularly the rejection of the use of violence and the recognition that further political development could only take place on the basis of agreement. He made it clear that the Government stood by its undertaking that Northern Ireland would not cease to be part of the United Kingdom without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland and said that he saw no reason to expect consent to be given to any of the changes in the sovereignty of Northern Ireland suggested in the Report. Mr Prior went on to stress that in these circumstances HMG's continuing objective was to provide a basis on which all the inhabitants of Northern Ireland could live peacefully and prosperously whilst giving full expression to their identities and aspirations; he welcomed the Report's statement that the participating parties remained open to discuss other views.

4. The Report was immediately condemned by unionist spokesmen in Northern Ireland. On the day the Report was published, the DUP organised a campaign in which several thousand posters were displayed throughout the Province with the simple message "Ulster is British" and the DUP leader, Mr Ian Paisley MP, together with several of his colleagues crossed the border into the Republic of Ireland and placed copies of their posters on the GPO in O'Connell Street. For the Ulster Unionists, Mr Harold McCusker MP made it clear that loyalist objections were to the principle rather than the form of a united Ireland and dismissed the Forum Report as an irrelevance and a waste of time. The Alliance Party also rejected the Forum's analysis and conclusions while Sinn Fein called the Report "toothless, wishy-washy nonsense" and a "disappointment for nationalists".

5. Conflicting statements were made by representatives of the participating parties. In particular, both Mr Charles Haughey the leader of Fianna Fail and Mr Seamus Mallon the deputy leader of the SDLP stressed that a unitary state was the only firm recommendation in the Report and that the other structures examined by the Forum were unworkable. The other party leaders, however, stressed that they were willing to consider any proposals, including the three set out in the Forum Report, which could meet the criteria set out in the important paragraph 5.2. Those criteria do not in fact imply support for any particular constitutional arrangement.

6. Shortly after the publication of the Report speculation appeared in a number of newspapers that HMG was giving sympathetic consideration to the proposal for joint authority or joint sovereignty. Responding to such reports, Mr Paisley declared that there would be "all-out resistance" from unionists to any form of joint London/Dublin authority and warned that the possibility of a violent reaction could not be ruled out. "If Britain starts to undermine Ulster's constitutional position within the United Kingdom, then no holds would be barred". Similar warnings were issued by the Ulster Unionist candidate for the European Elections, Mr John Taylor MP and were repeated by several DUP members during an Assembly debate on the Forum Report held on 10 May.

C: UUP PROPOSALS FOR DEVOLUTION

7. Shortly before the publication of the Forum Report, the Ulster Unionist Party issued a document outlining their proposals for the development of the Assembly. The UUP plan for what it calls "administrative devolution" envisages the transfer of responsibility for the administration of a wide range of local government type services to the Assembly and briefly examines the role which representatives of the nationalist community might play in such a structure. The document also refers to the possibility of introducing a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland to protect the civil and religious liberties of its citizens. Both the DUP

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and Alliance Party said that they would consider the UUP document but urged the Ulster Unionists to return to the Assembly; whilst Mr John Hume MP, leader of the SDLP, said that he would at least study the document before issuing a response which was more than he expected from unionists in respect of the Forum Report.

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

10 May 1984

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