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*fn. PWS
- R. 17 15th* January 1980

Dear Richard,

MT

Pemie Punter

PWS 12/11

CONFERENCE ON THE GOVERNMENT OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Now that the Conference has met for its first week of sessions, my Secretary of State thought it might be a suitable time to give his OD colleagues some information about progress so far.

All things considered, the Conference has got off to a good start. Those taking part are working together well, and are making a conscious effort much of the time to be friendly and co-operative towards one another and the Government's team. A Conference routine has been established. We shall be meeting every Monday to Wednesday each week, except when other commitments rule out meetings - as, for example, the European Parliamentary session does for the week beginning Monday 14 January.

As regards the timetable of the Conference, the Secretary of State explained in his opening remarks that there was no target date for its conclusion. But he would be disappointed if it did not prove possible for him to report the outcome of the Conference to his colleagues in the Cabinet to enable them to reach their conclusions on the broad framework of proposals which the Government might put to Parliament by around Easter. But this may prove an over-optimistic aim. Already members of the Conference are saying that it is more important to get it right than to reach an early conclusion.

It was only to be expected, from the transactions in the period leading up to the Conference, that the question of the scope of the Conference might prove a stumbling block. But we believe

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that we are on the way to solving that problem - i.e. how to accommodate the SDLP's wish to have discussions going wider than the task of the Conference without compromising the "ground rules" set out in the Government's Working Paper. The proposed solution, to which we do not believe the parties will object, is for a separate meeting or meetings before the Conference ends with all the parties (together or separately, as they prefer,) on security; the economy, and the EEC. These matters are not within the scope of possible transfer of powers but affect the relationship between Westminster and a devolved administration.

We hope and believe that, with this obstacle circumvented in that way, the Conference will settle down in the week of 21 January to discuss the wide range of substantive matters set out in the Working Paper and enlarged by the initial submissions of the three parties which were introduced at the second session of the Conference. A re-worded Agenda was drawn up in the light of the submissions and given to the parties for their consideration before the Conference resumes.

Our judgement is that, though the two main and mutually opposed parties will press their disagreements as far as they can, they will not take them to the point of breaking up the Conference. For their different reasons all three parties want to remain at the Conference and see it achieve a measure of success.

There is one final point I should emphasise. The Conference is meeting in private. It has been agreed that at the end of each session an official spokesman shall give to the Press, without elaboration, a brief Press Statement, the terms of which have been agreed by the Conference. Members of the Conference themselves suggested that, in their own contacts with the Press, they should exercise a "self-denying ordinance", and though there has not been total consistency there are definite indications that they want to

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take that restriction seriously. It is therefore important that nothing said about the Conference by those speaking for the Government should give ground for complaint from the parties that the Government was being less discreet than they are.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Private Secretaries to all OD members, and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Yours ever,

R A Harrington

R A HARRINGTON
Private Secretary

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