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OD(80) 24th Meeting

COPY NO 45

CABINET

DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a Meeting held at
10 Downing Street on
TUESDAY 18 NOVEMBER 1980 at 9.45 am

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon William Whitelaw MP
Secretary of State for the
Home Department

The Rt Hon Lord Hailsham
Lord Chancellor

The Rt Hon Lord Carrington
Secretary of State for Foreign
and Commonwealth Affairs

The Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey Howe QC MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Francis Pym MP
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Lord Soames
Lord President of the Council

The Rt Hon Sir Ian Gilmour MP
Lord Privy Seal

The Rt Hon John Nott MP
Secretary of State for Trade

THE FOLLOWING WERE ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon Humphrey Atkins MP
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

SECRETARIAT

Sir Robert Armstrong
Mr R L Wade-Gery
Mr R M Hastie-Smith

SUBJECT

NORTHERN IRELAND: POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

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NORTHERN IRELAND: POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

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Previous Reference: OD(80) 16th Meeting, Item 1

The Committee considered two memoranda by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the political and security situation in Northern Ireland (OD(80) 67 and 68). They also had before them a letter to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland from the Lord Chancellor dated 17 November 1980. Their discussion and conclusions reached are recorded separately.

Cabinet Office

19 November 1980

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DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

LIMITED CIRCULATION ANNEX

OD(80) 24th Meeting Minutes
TUESDAY 18 NOVEMBER 1980 AT 9.45 am

SECRET

NORTHERN IRELAND: POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

The Committee considered two memoranda by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on political development and the security situation in Northern Ireland. They also had before them a letter to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland from the Lord Chancellor dated 17 November 1980 about the difficulties underlying the political situation in Northern Ireland.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND said that the Government's most immediate interest in Northern Ireland was to maintain the present improvement in the security situation. Casualties would increase if that situation deteriorated as a result of mistakes in other areas of policy. Nevertheless it remained the Government's aim to achieve political advance in the Province. Although discussions with Northern Irish leaders over the last 18 months had shown how difficult this aim was, it would be dangerous from a security point of view to conclude and announce that further progress was impossible. But it had to be recognised that no progress at present be made on the basis of the proposals put forward by the Government in July (Cmd 7950), each of which had encountered resolute opposition from one or other Northern Irish community. In this situation, he had identified the five policy options listed in Annex A to OD(80) 67. They were not mutually exclusive. But in his view two of them could be discarded, viz the introduction of a new local government structure, and the integration of Northern Ireland into the political and administrative structure of Great Britain. The minority community believed that the

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shortcomings of local government had given rise to the troubles which had boiled over in 1969. The three remaining policy options involved discussion with Mr Haughey of a "wider framework" involving Dublin and Westminster; improvements to direct rule, including a degree of "Ulsterisation"; and a "progressive approach" under which there would be an elected Assembly with limited initial tasks but able to assume wider responsibility later. All these courses would encounter considerable resistance and none offered great promise of success. But in combination they appeared to represent the best way forward in the present circumstances.

THE LORD CHANCELLOR said that, in the letter which he had written to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and circulated to the members of the Committee, he had set out a different analysis, though in many respects his conclusions did not differ greatly from those suggested by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. It was an illusion to suppose that constitutional development at present offered significant hope of progress. What all concerned needed was a modus vivendi which allowed people to go about their business in reasonable peace and good order, developing relations between the two communities and the two parts of Ireland on the basis of practical needs and opportunities. This suggested that a functional approach might be more promising. This could be applied both to cross-border co-operation and to the Province's internal affairs. Security co-operation between North and South had already improved considerably as the result of contacts between the Prime Minister and Mr Haughey. Other functional links could be developed, particularly in the economic field. Electricity and housing were two possible areas. This approach could help to develop the "wider framework" between Dublin and Westminster to which the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland had referred. Internally it might be preferable to leave the idea of an elective Assembly on one side for the time being, because of its potential for divisiveness, and instead to appoint, under British chairmen, functional working parties corresponding broadly to the old Stormont ministries. These could be composed of members of both communities, including eminent persons who were not political leaders as well as those with a past history of electoral success.

In discussion there was agreement that it would not be easy to make political progress in Northern Ireland on any democratic basis. An election in the near future might have a disturbing effect on the security situation and might

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in any case be stultified if one or more of the political parties refused to take part in it. The following points were made.

a. People in Northern Ireland longed for peace. The hunger strike in the Maze represented a threat, but in general the security situation had been improving steadily. The Royal Ulster Constabulary, who were growing in strength and confidence, were steadily taking over functions from the Army and thereby making troop withdrawals possible. It was a particular attraction of the proposed functional approach that it seemed unlikely to upset this process.

b. Mr Haughey's intentions and objectives were not clear. His eyes would certainly be on his forthcoming general election, which might not be long delayed. But he was also a visionary, whose ultimate aims might be both grandiose and impractical. It could not be certain that the suggested functional approach would offer the Republic enough to satisfy him. But his continued co-operation would be essential for security reasons.

c. Some thinking in Dublin seemed to be in line with a "functional approach" to cross-border co-operation. Mr O'Kennedy had already expressed similar ideas in the margin of meetings of Finance Ministers of the European Community. The failure of the Sunningdale proposal for a Council of Ireland was a warning that the functional approach to relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic could not be carried too far or fast without alienating the Protestant community in the North. The basis would need to be a Westminster-Dublin axis, not a Dublin-Belfast one. It was likely that Mr Haughey would be seeking a more formal process of regular consultation between his Government and that of the United Kingdom, to supplement the informal Summit Meetings between himself and the Prime Minister.

d. The functional approach in internal matters would need further detailed study. Despite its attractions, there would be difficulties in Northern Ireland, particularly with Dr Paisley, if there was no democratic element in whatever policy was now implemented. The Protestant parties were anxious for an early election in order to demonstrate the relative

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strength of their popular support. There were already a number of appointed bodies in Northern Ireland, some of which had executive powers, eg in the fields of health, housing and social services. A decision to create more of them might seem to have a colonial flavour. But it might perhaps be possible to include a democratic element in the appointment process, eg if candidates for appointment were put forward by the political parties.

e. It would be very difficult to redraw local authority boundaries in Northern Ireland as a means of separating the two communities. In most areas Roman Catholics and Protestants were too intermingled. Nor would the Protestants welcome a separation which had the effect of destroying the integrity of Belfast City Council. It might however be possible to make some modest increase in the powers at present exercised by local authorities in Northern Ireland. It was encouraging in this context that a Catholic-dominated Council was at present operating successfully in Londonderry.

f. Whatever the Prime Minister said on Northern Ireland in the forthcoming Debate on the Address would command wide attention. It would be important to make clear that there was no intention of conferring political status on the hunger strikers in Northern Ireland. Unless this point was regularly repeated, there was a risk that the Government's position might be thought to be weakening.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Committee agreed that the Government's first objective must be to maintain the improvement in the security situation in Northern Ireland. This involved persuading Mr Haughey to maintain his present co-operative attitude, but care needed to be taken lest the appearance of too much cordiality with the Republic should cause resentment among the Northern Irish Protestants. No new major political initiatives would be appropriate while the Maze hunger strike was continuing. The idea of a formal Anglo-Irish Conference should be avoided. It would however be right to listen receptively to any ideas which Mr Haughey might offer on developing relations between Westminster and Dublin. Further work needed to be done on this subject; on ways in which direct rule in Northern Ireland might be improved; and on the respective merits of the functional approach to internal

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developments and progressive concept for an elective Assembly. As regards points to be made in the Debate on the Address, further thought should be given to the text set out in Appendix I to OD(80) 67 in order to shorten it and take account of points made in the Committee's discussion.

The Committee -

1. Invited the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to suggest to the Prime Minister a revised draft of what might be said about the Government's policy on Northern Ireland during the Debate on the Address.
2. Invited the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to give further consideration, in the light of points made in the discussion, to the way in which the concept of a "wider framework" might be developed, initially in preparation for the Prime Minister's meeting with Mr Haughey in December.
3. Invited the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to give further thought to the various ideas which had been put forward for improving direct rule.
4. Invited the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to consult them further at a later date on whether a functional approach was to be preferred to any early attempt to establish an elective Assembly in Northern Ireland.

Cabinet Office
19 November 1980

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