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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

*Ireland*



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*Mr. Whitely 31*

*LG. 31*

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*3/3* 31 March, 1980.

*Dear Michael*

NORTHERN IRELAND CONFERENCE

Although my Secretary of State has reported the outcome of the last three days of the Conference to the Prime Minister, to the other Ministers in the MISC.24 group, and briefly to the Cabinet, he thought it might be helpful if the series of accounts of the Conference which we have circulated from time to time were to be rounded off by the following.

The Conference adjourned at the end of its session on Monday 24 March. It had then held 34 half day sessions. It had become clear soon after the series of meetings which ended on 5 March (reported in my letter of 7 March) that the three parties, and especially the SDLP, did not want the Conference in that form to go on much longer, because it was clear that it was not making real progress. So it was agreed that the aim should be to reach the end of the Agenda by Easter and then adjourn so that my Secretary of State could report to his colleagues and the Government produce, in the light of the discussions at the Conference, some more closely focussed proposals for further consideration.

That background overshadowed the remaining discussions. However, there was a substantial discussion of financial arrangements in a devolved administration, which produced predictable demands for more money and more freedom to spend it, and a notable concern about the "additionality" of funds received in Northern Ireland from EEC sources. There was also a discussion of ways of testing the acceptability of any future proposals which brought out the attachment of the UDUP in particular to the use of the technique of a referendum.

The UDUP and Alliance Party both laid great stress on the point that the Conference was being adjourned and not terminated. And they are anxious that when discussions resume they should be in the context of the Conference, preferably with the additional participation of the Official Unionist Party (OUP), and that no preferential treatment shall be given to parties and interests which have not borne the burden of the Conference so far.

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To sum up the value to us of the Conference so far, it has not reached an agreed solution, but then it was never expected to do so. It is an achievement in itself that the three parties have talked to each other, mostly in a good tempered way, about issues that greatly concern and deeply divide them. There has been no walking out.

Some points have been established. It was clear that none of the three parties wanted, or would accept, a British-style local government solution - and it would be a mistake to think of that as in any way a "fall back" if no fuller agreement on devolution can be reached. All three parties want devolution of a full range of powers no less than was devolved in 1973, and a single-chamber Assembly elected by some form of proportional representation. The prime issue on which disagreement centres has become clear; it is the role of the minority in decision taking - is power to be shared among the representatives of both communities, or is there to be majority rule, albeit with some safeguards for the minority.

The Conference has also enabled more private talks to be held with the parties individually in which it has been possible to go some way towards exploring their room for manoeuvre. Additionally, the Conference has prompted the establishment of a series of "parallel talks" with the SDLP and Alliance Party which have ranged over security and economic matters. They have not told us much that we did not know, but a dialogue on these matters - especially with the SDLP - has itself been of some significance.

Looking ahead, the next step is to try to work up some proposals, drawing on what was said in the Conference, which would give each party enough of what it wants so as to secure a measure of acquiescence. Given the gap that divides the parties, that will be no mean task. It will be no use our putting forward for consideration a proposal, or even a broad area of proposals, if either side of the community is going to reject it out of hand as unacceptable. We cannot impose a solution. Hence there must be further negotiation with the individual parties first, to try to establish whether there is any middle ground.

We aim in the light of these further private talks to prepare and publish, after consideration by the MISC. 24 group and the Cabinet, a further Working Paper which would contain a hard core of proposals and a range of variants, though these would be more narrowly focussed than the series of models appended to the earlier Working Paper published in November. When published these proposals would need to be discussed bilaterally with the Northern Ireland parties, and there might well be a demand for a Parliamentary debate. It would then be right to reconvene the Conference, though not necessarily in the old form - for example, we would hope to persuade the OUP to join.

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There are too many imponderables to make it possible to be precise about the timetable of these various steps, but the aim is to have firm proposals ready, and a Bill drafted, so that there can be an appropriate mention in the Queen's Speech in November.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Private Secretaries to OD Members, and to David Wright (Cabinet Office).

Yours sincerely  
Mike Hopkins

M. W. HOPKINS

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