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Ref. A0549

PRIME MINISTER

Northern Ireland: Political Development

(OD(79) 39)

BACKGROUND

When OD discussed political progress in Northern Ireland on 17th October you invited the Home Secretary to act as Chairman of a Ministerial Group consisting of the Secretary of State for Defence, Lord Privy Seal, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Lord Chancellor to supervise the preparation of a consultative document which would ultimately be laid before Parliament and serve as a discussion document to be tabled at a Conference with the leaders of the main Northern Irish political parties. This Ministerial Group has now met (although the Lord Privy Seal was unavoidably absent) and this memorandum by the Home Secretary is the result of their work.

2. The success of the proposed Conference still appears to be something of a gamble. The Alliance and the SDLP will probably come: so will Mr. Paisley. But the position of the Official Unionists is more doubtful, as Mr. Powell is strongly opposed.

HANDLING

3. You may care to invite the Home Secretary to introduce his paper. You may then care to invite the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to give their views as they have both played a significant part in the preparation of the consultative document. You may also wish to ask the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary for his views recognising that the unavoidable absence of the Lord Privy Seal from the Ministerial Group meeting may have resulted in insufficient weight having been given to the international reception of the consultative document. The points to establish in subsequent discussion are:-

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- Tone*
- (a) Does the document generally strike the right positive note? The crucial test is does it demonstrate the firm wish of Her Majesty's Government to make progress, while setting out the necessary limitations on the area within which any conference at this time can operate.
- Sunke*
- (b) Is the general form of the consultative document sensible? The Ministerial Group spent a lot of time and effort on this point on which the Lord Chancellor made a major contribution. As much as possible has been relegated to a series of Appendices and the foreword has been made as short as possible. The object here is to make the document itself short and crisp and not containing details of models and functions on which the Government might subsequently be hooked.
- (c) Should the Ministerial Group be invited to give thought to the best way of publicly presenting the consultative document? The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at the Ministerial Group meeting expressed enthusiasm for guidance from his colleagues and a willingness to submit a paper on this specific issue.
- (d) Is every possible kind of pressure being applied to the political leaders in Northern Ireland to ensure that they come to the Conference?
A number of OD members may be able to assist in this through contacts with religious, industrial, academic and trade union leaders of opinion in Northern Ireland.

CONCLUSION

4. In the light of discussion on these points the Committee might be guided to reach the following conclusions:-

- (a) To agree the consultative document subject to final editorial polishing.
- (b) To assist the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in putting pressure on the Northern Irish political leaders.

RA

(Robert Armstrong)

2nd November, 1979

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(a) Upon the receipt of the report...

It is noted that the report...

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The report also indicates...

A review of the report...

It is noted that the report...

(b) To assist the Director...

on the following factors...