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Copied to Ireland
Prime Minister (Lynch visit)



PRIME MINISTER

POLITICAL PROGRESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

When you see Mr Lynch next week to discuss security issues he will almost certainly ask about the Government's intentions for the political future of Northern Ireland. I believe - and I think Peter Carrington would too - that it will help to secure from him the kind of commitment we want on security if you were prepared to give him some indication of the direction in which we hope to move on the political front.

I was asked at our Ministerial (OD) Meeting on Northern Ireland held on 10 July, to bring forward proposals for consideration by colleagues before the end of the Recess. This work is well advanced and I expect to be able to bring forward considered proposals, which will have been discussed with the Departments most closely concerned, in about a month's time, during which period I shall have completed my second round of talks with the party leaders. The further development thereafter that I have in mind is that we should as early in the resumed session as we can, publish a White Paper setting out proposals on Northern Ireland policy in all its aspects, but with particular reference to political development.

The aim of that policy is clear and self-evident: the re-establishment of the rule of law in all parts of the Province under the protection of a conventional police authority, with the Army progressively withdrawn; the re-development of a crippled economy to something nearer viability than now exists; and the devolution to elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland of powers and responsibilities for their internal government so that they can work out their own future together.

No-one can foresee when the attainment of this objective might be possible. I am clear however that the present Government must declare its intentions this Autumn which will give reasonable expectations that measurable and visible progress will have been made towards it within say the next two to three years.

My provisional conclusions on political developments - subject to further consultations with colleagues - are as follows:

- (i) Direct rule must be brought progressively to an end and as soon as possible, for it does nothing to bring the communities together and simply leaves the United Kingdom Government exposed to criticism on every kind of issue (big and small) by all sides in the two communities, and internationally for failing to make progress.
- (ii) The political gap between the two communities is at present unbridgeable. Neither will at present accept a system of

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devolved, legislative and executive government which is acceptable to the other, although I believe such a system could be constructed - possibly a bicameral assembly with the upper chamber having entrenched powers to protect the minority against legislative or executive discrimination.

- (iii) The Government would plunge straight into a political dead-end if we were to bring forward proposals for a fully worked out scheme, however reasonable it might appear to us, which we then had to negotiate with both sides in the present temper. We must be ready to bring forward comprehensive proposals for direct negotiation at the right time, but that time is not yet.
- (iv) What we can actually do, however, is to embark on a process of re-engaging political activity in the government of the Province in a progressive way, aiming, I suggest, first of all for an assembly having only modest powers and with the executive government retained for an initial period in the hands of the Government at Westminster. Successive steps by which we would initiate such a process (which might at the very outset amount to appointing no more than a council of advisers for Northern Ireland Ministers) are still being worked out. They will need to be flexible so that we can adapt them as prospects for progress grow or diminish.

I believe that an approach to political devolution of this kind, which would allow democratic institutions to develop over a period of time, would be welcomed in the Province, where they are as fearful of haste as they are of each other; and I believe it would be recognised internationally as a responsible and constructive way forward. Much has still to be worked out and you and colleagues concerned will wish to give this very careful consideration. If we agree to proceed down this route then I would envisage, following the publication of proposals in a White Paper, that we should undertake a determined political campaign in the Province to convince opinion at all levels (and not just at the level of Westminster MPs) that we are set on a hopeful and constructive course.

You will not want to go into this with Mr Lynch but it may help you to respond to him in a positive way to have these thoughts in your mind. We must assume that on such a matter as this anything said to the Irish Government will eventually leak. I would see no harm in that provided that following your discussion with Mr Lynch you yourself, eg in a Press Statement or Press Conference, made a short statement about political intentions of a kind which you would make to him perhaps on the following lines:

- (a) The Government is committed to find an acceptable way of giving Northern Ireland people more control over their own affairs and respecting their basic right of democratic self-determination for their constitutional future.

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- (b) The failure of previous forms of devolved government, and the conflicting aspirations of the two communities in Northern Ireland, make it difficult to conceive of an immediate and wholly acceptable form of legislative and executive internal self government for the Province.
- (c) Nevertheless, the Government wishes to see an end to the present arrangements for direct rule and believes the people of the Province generally share that wish. All the political leaders in the Province have expressed this view.
- (d) Accordingly we shall be making proposals as soon as possible after Parliament returns for first steps on the road to acceptable devolution of powers. These proposals will be extensively discussed with the people at all levels in the Province itself before specific measures are put before Parliament at Westminster later this session.
- (e) Meanwhile our policy on security - defeat of terrorism and extension of normal policing - is being vigorously pursued; and we are continuing within the broad framework of our economic policy for the United Kingdom as a whole, to maintain, and we hope restore, the economy of Northern Ireland itself.

If you were content to open up the subject in this way with the Taoiseach, I would follow the matter up in my next talk with Mr O'Kennedy on 17 September.

I am copying this minute to Peter Carrington, the other members of OD Committee and Sir John Hunt.

P. A.

31 August 1979

I see no possibility of opening up in this way with Mr. Lynch. He would assume the general drift had been approved by Cabinet. Success is hard, but dismissed. The motive can contemplate going to in proposals for effective local government. The next rounds too much as if we are looking then as a colony - not as part of the UK.

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