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Ref. A03400

PRIME MINISTER

Northern Ireland

*Prime Minister
a brief to update the
meeting papers in your
earlier box.
Duty clerk. 30/10.*

When you and the Home Secretary meet the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland tomorrow afternoon, he will want to bring you up to date on the present security and political situation in Northern Ireland.

2. There are three developments in particular which have changed the situation since the writing of the note by officials dated 21st October and my note of 22nd October:

- (1) The hunger strike, and the Government's decision on civilian clothing, have raised inter-community tension in Northern Ireland to a very high level. The Catholic community are solidly behind the strikers; the majority as solidly against. The decision on clothing has been seen by the Protestant community as a surrender and a betrayal and an outrage. Cardinal O'Fiaich and the BBC conspired to present the decision as a concession which the Northern Ireland Office then tried partly to call back: it was first announced as a decision to allow prisoners to wear their own clothing and then it was made clear that it was a decision to allow them to wear civilian clothing issued by the authorities. So the Catholic community are not as pleased as they might have been. To sum up, these developments have had a very polarising effect.
- (2) The Official Unionist Party collapsed in disarray at their party conference. A resolution in favour of devolution as the long-run aim, and more local government in the shorter term, was rejected. The OUP has no policy, save in so far as Mr. Molyneux came out against a step-by-step approach.
- (3) Dr. Paisley has also let it be known that he sees no future in a step-by-step approach. His Democratic Unionist Party recently cancelled a meeting with the Northern Ireland Office, on the ground that it would not meet people who were negotiating with the IRA (that is Dr. Paisley's formula to describe the concession on civilian clothing).

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3. For the time being it is very difficult to see how the situation can be moved forward. The evolutionary option suggested in paragraph 10(iv) of the note by officials is for the time being unavailable, though perhaps we should not lose sight of it even now as a long-term possibility. The Northern Ireland Office are now turning more towards the idea of tentative exploration within the wider United Kingdom-Ireland framework (the option at paragraph 10(v) of the note by officials). The advantage of this sort of approach is that it can be made to involve everybody with a stake in the matter, including the Irish Government. It would have to be taken slowly, and very carefully prepared, and a lot more thought needs to be given to it before it is possible to say in any detail what it might involve. If, however, this is the approach which commends itself, you will need to take advantage of your visit to Dublin to indicate to the Taoiseach, however tentatively, that this is the way our minds are moving.

4. If as a result of your meeting with the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland you come to the conclusion that this is (if not the best) the only way forward, there will have to be some urgent work done before your visit to Dublin. One possibility would be for the Secretary of State to adumbrate these ideas in a paper for OD, on the basis of which work could be done by officials: we are due to discuss Northern Ireland in OD next Friday, 7th November. That loses a week; and, if you thought that there was a sufficient degree of agreement with the Home Secretary and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland tomorrow, you could authorise immediate work by officials, to start at the beginning of next week. Any discussion of OD at the end of the week would on this basis be provisional and tentative, and it might be better to delay discussion in OD until officials had developed an outline plan as a basis for the discussion.

5. Finally, there remains the problem of what to put in The Queen's Speech on the Opening of Parliament. The formula at present in the draft will not do in the new circumstances. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will

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come to the meeting with three variants. But the situation seems so highly charged and uncertain that it is very difficult to be sure that any words which might be agreed now or next week will still make sense on 20th November. It may be that the best plan will be not to refer to Northern Ireland in the Gracious Speech at all.

RA

ROBERT ARMSTRONG

30th October, 1980

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