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2 April 1981

 Mrs
 Prime Minister
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Dear Michael

THE AFTERMATH OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S VISIT TO NORTHERN IRELAND

You asked for an assessment of feeling in the Province in the wake of the Prime Minister's visit there on 5/6 March.

There is little doubt that the visit had served its immediate purpose conveying reassurance to the Protestant/Unionist population and taking some of the wind from Dr Paisley's sails. The Prime Minister's authoritative statement of the constitutional position and the Government's and her personal commitment to it has made Unionists less receptive to Dr Paisley's "Carson trail" exercise. Her expression of concern about the economy of the Province and the announcement on energy costs was welcomed by all. Some initial criticism from the minority that the visit had been too much angled towards Unionist feelings waned in face of the realisation that the PM had been just as firm in relation to the joint studies.

Reassuring Protestant Unionists is not, however, a one-off job, nor has it been at any time this century. Inevitably the calming effect of the visit has been partially, but far from wholly, dissipated in the succeeding four weeks - with contributions to that end from Dr Paisley. The turnout for Paisley's rallies has, however, been disappointing for him and generally smaller than reported in the media (eg probably no more than half the 30,000 said to have been at Stormont on 28 March). But he has stuck doggedly to his line that the guarantee does not preclude an alleged conspiracy with the Republic aimed at conditioning the majority eventually to accept Irish reunification. Mr Lenihan's equivocal statements have not helped. Though Mr Atkins' firm statement on 23 March and the subsequent meeting between the Prime Minister and the Taoiseach in Maastricht have persuaded some Unionists that their fears are misplaced, the overall effect of statements and counter-statements has been to sustain confusion and doubt in public opinion. A period of reticence from Dublin would be helpful.

Many Protestants, while accepting the Government's assurances nevertheless fear that something is going on behind their backs. What this means is that we have to go on repeating reassurances at regular intervals, as the Prime Minister recognised in a TV interview when she was in the Province. We have no other card which will take the trick. There is virtually no help to be expected from moderate Unionists; the UUP are divided and lack firm leadership. They have not yet succeeded in carrying the fight to the DUP, and Mr Molyneux has remained largely - and usually silently - on the defensive. They are worried about further defections to the

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DUP. Nevertheless they have - at last - outwitted Paisley in one important matter by getting their own man nominated in the Fermanagh and South Tyrone by-election and keeping the DUP out.

Looking to the immediate future Dr Paisley is clearly going to continue his campaign against the Government both in the period leading up to the 20 May District Council elections - and thereafter on the basis of the "mandate" he will claim he has. (He and everyone else expect he will gain votes at the expense of the UUP). What tricks he has still got up his sleeve we do not yet know. He probably has not worked it out himself. But further stunts of a more or less serious kind are to be expected, and it is significant that he is now attacking the Chief Constable personally. The Secretary of State has, of course, commissioned contingency planning on how we could deal with possible Paisley moves which threaten law and order.

Meanwhile Paisley's antics continue against the background of the continuing hunger strike at the Maze Prison. All our contacts confirm that there is little support so far for the hunger strike in the minority community. As Easter and deaths draw nearer, the support is likely to grow and the hunger strike campaign has now received added impetus by the clever move of putting Sands, a leading hunger striker, up as a candidate for the Fermanagh and South Tyrone by-election. My Secretary of State will be writing separately to the PM and his colleagues this week about the implications of this move. But this much is already clear: it is a move which will ensure substantial media coverage for what had threatened to become a non-event; even if as is likely, the sole Unionist candidate wins because enough Nationalist voters decide that they cannot stomach Sands and abstain, the IRA will be able to claim a factitious level of support for the hunger strike on the basis of votes cast for Sands; and the SDLP who decided not to stand against Sands will be damaged - and regrettably the cause of responsible and non-violent minority opinion will be damaged with them.

To summarise, the Prime Minister's visit was highly effective in reassuring the population at large and slowing down the Paisley bandwagon. The bandwagon has not been brought to a halt however and we shall need to continue to make reassuring noises to the Unionist community as Paisley tries to accelerate his campaign. That campaign coincides dangerously with the now more likely rise in interest in the hunger strike (and thus with the need to calm the minority community) as Easter and hunger strikers' death approach.

Separate comment is called for on reaction to the PM from the Security Forces. As hitherto, the PM's interest and concern was greatly appreciated and the impact on morale is still there. This is a benefit not to be underestimated.

The PM can, in our judgement, feel well satisfied with the impact of her visit. None of our problems is susceptible to a "single shot" solution but the base is well-established for continued expressions of the PM's interest and concern - and for another visit at an appropriate time.

Yours sincerely
Mike Hopkins
M W HOPKINS

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