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From: THE PRIVATE SECRETARY

Ireland



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Pamie Hunter

Michael Alexander Esq
10 Downing Street
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20 December 1979

Dear Michael,

Ms. Hunt

and

NORTHERN IRELAND CONFERENCE

Since I last wrote to the Private Secretaries to OD members on 23 November there has been a period of uncertainty about the prospects for mounting the Conference. Nothing is certain in Northern Ireland: but it seems safe to say that the Conference will take place and will open on Monday 7 January in Parliament Buildings, Stormont. My Secretary of State thought that his OD colleagues might welcome a brief account of recent developments.

Shortly after my earlier letter the Government's Working Paper prepared for the Conference (Cmnd. 7763) was debated in the House of Commons on Thursday 29 November. In that debate the Working Paper, and the initiative generally, had a reasonably good reception. The Opposition found little to criticise, though its support was muted. One aspect that caused concern was the lack of understanding on the part of Conservative back-benchers of the policy underlying the Government's initiative of seeking to return a wide range of political responsibilities to elected representatives in Northern Ireland. They seemed to see the way ahead more in terms of enlarging the scope of local government in the Province - a policy which, whatever its merits or demerits, would never be likely to secure the support of the minority community. My Secretary of State is taking steps to see that the Government's policy is put across effectively to back-benchers.

But since that time the main difficulty has been caused by the SDLP's disavowal of Mr Fitt after he had accepted the Working Paper as a basis for the Conference, and Mr Fitt's subsequent resignation from the party leadership. The SDLP's concern has been to broaden the permitted scope of the Conference; in particular they have been anxious that it should not be precluded from discussing their wider aspirations for "power sharing" and Irish unity. The difficulty,

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of course, is that Dr Paisley, though keen to take part in a Conference, has all along made it plain that he would not be prepared to take part if the basis were widened to that extent. Mr Atkins has had a number of meetings with Mr Hume (since he succeeded Mr Fitt as SDLP leader) and with Dr Paisley with a view to reaching an understanding on the basis for the Conference. Enclosed is a copy of a statement agreed between Mr Atkins and Mr Hume and made public after they had again met on Saturday last, 15 December. The broad content (but not the text) of this statement had been put to Dr Paisley, who had not dissented from it. After some final hesitations both participants have now agreed to take part in the Conference on the basis of the understandings set out in the statement. Judging by Mr Hume's behaviour since the agreement on Saturday, we cannot be confident that he is yet firmly in his party's saddle: that does not look well for the Conference.

The points covered by the joint statement are, from our point of view, more a clarification of the basis of the Conference (as set out in the Working Paper) than a departure from it. Points 1 and 2 make it clear that any party can table a paper containing as wide a range of its proposals as it chooses, and these can be discussed to the extent (likely in practice to be limited) that the other participants agree to do so. Point 3 recognises the possibility of further political development beyond the limited area set down for consideration in the Working Paper. The reaffirmation of the two-fold approach of the UK Government towards the status of Northern Ireland which is set out here is seen as important by the SDLP. Point 4 reiterates what was said in my earlier letter, and by the Secretary of State in last month's debate, about the "Irish dimension" in terms of practical cross-border co-operation. Point 5 makes it clear that, though the Working Paper takes a negative attitude towards "power sharing" as attempted in 1973/4, because there is little, if any, prospect of inter-party agreement on it, nevertheless it provides an ample basis for consideration of somewhat similar arrangements.

Throughout this episode the OUP has maintained its position of refusal to take part in a Conference which it sees as a mere talking shop foredoomed to failure. There are some signs to discontent within the party on this attitude and it is just possible that there may be a change of heart. In writing again to Mr Molyneaux my Secretary of State has been careful to leave the door open.

All this will no doubt be further rehearsed in the House on Thursday next, 20 December when my Secretary of State answers questions including several about the political initiative.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Private Secretaries of OD members and to Martin Vile.

Louis, ans,
R. Harrington

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At meetings on 10 and 15 December the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and Mr John Hume of the SDLP discussed the working paper (Cmnd 7763) which is the basis for the proposed Conference. The following points were agreed :-

1. The Secretary of State's invitation to Conference participants in his speech in the House of Commons on 29 November (Hansard, cols 1507 - 8) to put in papers to the Conference means that the SDLP will be free to put forward papers containing their own proposals.
2. The Secretary of State as Chairman would invite those present to introduce their own papers orally. It will be for the Conference as a whole to consider how particular points in such papers should be pursued.
3. The Conference is not an end in itself, but is a means of identifying the 'highest possible level of agreement' on the transfer of responsibility for certain functions to locally elected representatives. Even after such a transfer, further political development remains possible, depending always upon the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland. The Government envisage the Conference as the first step in a developing process of agreement between the people of Northern Ireland. Further political development would be fully consistent with Section 1 of the Northern Ireland Constitution Act 1973, which means that Northern Ireland will remain a part of the UK as long as a majority of Northern Ireland inhabitants so wish, but that if such a majority indicated a wish for some change in their constitutional status, Her Majesty's Government would not stand in the way of such a change.
4. As regards the 'Irish dimension', the Conference (and in due course any elected body) would be able to discuss the relationship between an elected representative body in Northern Ireland and the Authorities of the Republic on all matters over which the former exercised responsibility.
5. The Working Paper (Cmnd 7763) makes it clear that, although there is no serious prospect of agreement on a return to the system of government which obtained in the first five months of 1974, arrangements to take account of the interests of the minority by a sharing of the exercise of governmental powers will be on the table for discussion by the Conference, as is evidenced by a number of references to such arrangements in the Working Paper itself.
6. The Secretary of State will be willing on request, and quite apart from the Conference, to have separate meetings with the parties represented at the Conference on wider issues.

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