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OD(79) 8th Meeting

COPY NO 42

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DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

MINUTES of a Meeting held
at 10 Downing Street on
WEDNESDAY 3 OCTOBER 1979 at 2.30 pm

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon William Whitelaw MP
Secretary of State for the
Home Department

The Rt Hon Lord Carrington
Secretary of State for Foreign
and Commonwealth Affairs and
Minister of Overseas Development

The Rt Hon Francis Pym MP
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Lord Soames
Lord President of the Council

The Rt Hon Sir Ian Gilmour MP
Lord Privy Seal

THE FOLLOWING WERE ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon Humphrey Atkins MP
Secretary of State for
Northern Ireland

The Rt Hon John Biffen MP
Chief Secretary, Treasury

The Rt Hon Sir Michael Havers QC MP
Attorney General

SECRETARIAT

Sir John Hunt
Mr R M Hastie-Smith
Mr P J Fowler

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1. PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL PROGRESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Committee considered a memorandum by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (OD(79) 26). Their discussion and conclusions reached are recorded separately.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND said that at the Prime Minister's meeting with the Taoiseach on 3 September he had been agreed that co-operation on cross-border security must be substantially improved; that the suggestions made would be actively followed up, and that a Ministerial meeting would review progress. This Ministerial meeting was now arranged for 3 October and the memorandum sought agreement on the time to be taken both at the meeting and after it. A preliminary meeting of British and Irish officials had gone over our proposals to improve co-operation. It had not revealed the likely response of the Irish Ministers but it had shown that they would be anxious to avoid making public what of the detail of any proposals agreed. They would equally not wish to be seen to have merely accepted British proposals and would want any arrangements to regulate action taken on both sides. There seemed a fair chance that the Irish, who were already taking the matter very seriously, would view our worthwhile suggestions as a step towards surveillance flights over the border and over Garda reconnaissance and might agree that British army experts would cross the border to help deal with explosive devices found along it. If so, an acceptable agreed framework should be possible. But we were unlikely to get permission for RUC officers to interview suspected terrorists in Garda stations. If the meeting proved less than satisfactory then it would be necessary to expose behind a tough unilateral statement to pillars the Irish Government's policy of a commitment which while reflecting our disagreement would record the intention of both Governments to do further work and try again. The latter would be preferable as a public row would not help eliciting co-operation and be an unhelpful background for any launching of a political initiative in Northern Ireland.

In discussion it was suggested that although the other side as might gain would be useful it was perhaps to deterrence, suspected terrorists held over on the border that was potentially the most useful improvement in security co-operation. In relation to the suggestion in the memorandum that we might

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2. NORTHERN IRELAND: CROSS-BORDER SECURITY

The Committee considered a memorandum by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland concerning the meeting to be held in London on 5 October with the Irish Foreign Minister and Minister for Justice (OD(79) 27).

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND said that at the Prime Minister's meeting with the Taoiseach on 5 September it had been agreed that co-operation on cross-border security must be substantially improved; that the suggestions made would be actively followed up, and that a Ministerial meeting would review progress. This Ministerial meeting was now arranged for 5 October and the memorandum sought agreement on the line to be taken both at the meeting and after it. A preliminary meeting of British and Irish officials had gone over our proposals to improve security. It had not revealed the likely response of the Irish Ministers but it had shown that they would be anxious to avoid making public much of the detail of any proposals agreed. They would equally not wish to be seen to have merely accepted British proposals and would want any communiqué to register action taken on both sides. There seemed a fair chance that the Irish, who were clearly taking the matter very seriously, would offer some worthwhile improvements; eg over helicopter surveillance flights south of the border and some Garda reorganisation and might agree that British army experts could cross the border to help deal with explosive devices found along it. If so, an acceptable agreed communiqué should be possible. But we were unlikely to get permission for RUC officers to interview suspected terrorists in Garda stations. If the meeting proved less than satisfactory then it would be necessary to choose between a tough unilateral statement to pillory the Irish Government publicly or a communiqué which while reflecting our disappointment would record the intention of both Governments to do further work and try again. The latter would be preferable as a public row would set back existing co-operation and be an unhelpful background for any launching of a political initiative in Northern Ireland.

In discussion it was suggested that although the other items we might gain would be useful it was permission to interview suspected terrorists held south of the border that was potentially the most useful improvement in security co-operation. In relation to the suggestion in the memorandum that we might

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undertake to examine the possible advantages of legislation to match some provisions of the law in the Irish Republic it was noted that the Home Secretary already had powers, hitherto un-used, to ban any radio or television programme and that conviction for membership of a proscribed organisation on the word of a senior police officer would be unacceptable to the judiciary and might risk disturbing the present satisfactory operation of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. It was also noted that requests for the extradition of two suspected terrorists were being made to the Irish Republic. If these failed, as was expected, then they would be test cases for the effectiveness of trial before Republic courts.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said it had been agreed that it would be mistaken to try to pillory the Irish Government in public even if they would not concede any substantial progress on 5 October on cross-border security. But it should be made clear to them by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that he would need publicly to express our dissatisfaction and disappointment. If some worthwhile progress were achieved then we should try to accede as far as possible to any Irish wish to avoid precise detail and the appearance of one-sided concessions although we should still wish the communiqué to show something of the advances made and we should record, unilaterally if necessary, our disappointment over any important issues where the Irish Government had seemed unreasonable.

The Committee -

Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion and invited the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to be guided accordingly.

Cabinet Office
4 October 1979

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COPY NO 12

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DEFENCE AND OVERSEA POLICY COMMITTEE

LIMITED CIRCULATION ANNEX
OD(79) 8th Meeting, Minute 1
WEDNESDAY 3 OCTOBER 1979 at 2.30 pm

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1. PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL PROGRESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Committee had before them a memorandum by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (OD(79) 26) which analysed the current political situation and proposed the preparation of a White Paper concerning the creation of a new Consultative Assembly.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND said that he believed that the state of opinion in Ulster and abroad suggested that it was the right moment to take a political initiative. But it would be unsafe to be too precise about our destination at this stage. It could not be guaranteed that the proposed Consultative Assembly would function well or be worth having but the risk was worth taking. The need for legislation meant that it would be at least a year before the proposal could be implemented and the ensuing parliamentary debate might be difficult. There would also be some additional public expenditure but this was unlikely to exceed £2 million a year. In the current political situation he regarded the proposed way forward as the best that could be devised.

In discussion it was suggested that the visit of the Pope to Ireland and to the United States might have created a climate of opinion in which it would be possible to make faster political progress than was envisaged. On the other hand there were no indications that the Pope's visit had changed the intentions of the PIRA and, to the extent that the popular reaction to the Pope's visit to Ireland had been a display of Irish nationalism, Protestant opinion in Ulster may have been hardened by it.

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In further discussion it was suggested that political progress should be initiated by means of a conference with the main political parties in Ulster. This involved a number of risks. Some of the party leaders might not wish to attend: their main fear was that British Governments tended to press ahead too quickly and in too specific a direction. On the other hand, the proposed Consultative Assembly could be criticised for being too slow and undramatic an initiative, which failed to confer any immediate responsibility for their own affairs on the people of Ulster.

THE PRIME MINISTER, summing up the discussion, said that the Committee agreed that the long term aim must be to restore to Northern Ireland the same level of political responsibility for its own affairs that the rest of the United Kingdom enjoyed. The present situation of direct rule and military involvement must be brought to an end soon, or at the very least the United Kingdom must be absolved from blame in the eyes of the rest of the world for failing to bring it to an end. In order to achieve this aim a more far reaching political initiative than that proposed in the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland's paper was required. On balance the Committee felt that the best answer might lie in summoning a conference of the main Ulster political parties for which the agenda could, for example, offer several different options such as a regional council, a devolved form of government akin to the Stormont system, and other variants lying in between. This need not exclude further consideration of a Consultative Assembly as a fall-back position. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland should prepare a paper along these lines for the consideration of the Committee as soon as possible.

The Committee -

Took note, with approval, of the Prime Minister's summing up of their discussion and invited the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to be guided accordingly.

Cabinet Office

4 October 1979