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Ireland



QUEEN ANNE'S GATE LONDON SW1H 9AT

7 May 1980

My dear Prime Minister.

NORTHERN IRELAND

We have had two meetings of MISC 24 on Humphrey Atkins' papers. We still have further work to do on detail, but at our meeting with you and Peter Carrington on 12 May Humphrey Atkins, Quintin Hailsham and I would like to discuss our provisional conclusions on the key issues which I set out below.

- (i) The Conference adjourned for the Government to put forward its own "proposals for further discussion". These proposals should give a firm and clear indication of the direction we intend to follow with options on the central issue (the role of the minority).
- (ii) We should aim to publish our proposals early in June, after your meeting with the Taoiseach but before the House is asked to renew (as we must) in June/July the powers of direct rule.
- (iii) We should continue the private negotiations during the preparation of our proposals, both to secure as much common ground as possible and to help in getting the presentation right. After publication, negotiations should continue but:-
 - (a) the first significant step would be the debate in the House;
 - (b) July and August are not negotiating months in Northern Ireland and therefore

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- (c) if, as we hope, all the parties can be brought together in a resumed Conference we should aim to do this in September.
- (iv) As to content, we cannot compromise on the right of the majority to remain in the United Kingdom for as long as they wish. Equally, they cannot have a blank cheque on the Exchequer. Our proposals should restore responsibility over as wide a range of functions as is appropriate in a way which secures the highest degree of consensus possible in a divided and impoverished community. Since there is no agreement on the central issue of how to secure some consensus, we agree with Humphrey Atkins that within otherwise firm proposals we must offer options for further discussion on this.
- (v) We must not prejudice our aim of reducing the Army profile, and subsequently its deployment in Northern Ireland. We require, therefore, a prepared but concealed fall-back position so that, if the politicians turn intransigent, we can avoid a confrontation that would threaten security.
- (vi) The Taoiseach presents a problem. He cannot have what he wants on Irish unity - a seat at the Conference table and support for Irish unity (see (iv) above). But we want him to continue cross-border security co-operation: he could not flout international opinion by blatantly withdrawing it but only one telephone call is needed to cripple its effectiveness. And we want him to persuade the SDLP to participate in the negotiations and in the subsequent elections. There is real scope, however, for co-operation between the Republic and the United Kingdom and between North and South on economic, and particularly energy matters and this may be our main card.

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I am copying this letter to the Lord Chancellor, the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, the Secretary of State for Defence, the Lord Privy Seal, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

Margaret Thatcher
WdH

The Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP

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