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cc/c
Prime Minister

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PRIME MINISTER

NORTHERN IRELAND : POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

Since my minute to you of 8 February, I have had talks with Mr Hume and his SDLP colleagues, and also with Dr Paisley.

2. It was clear from these further discussions, taken with earlier discussions with the four constitutional parties, that the parties wish, in principle, to make progress. But the obstacles to agreement remain formidable, not least absence of determination to seek and exploit the common ground. Moreover, the atmosphere has been soured by John Hume's abortive talks with the Provisional IRA last month: neither the UUP nor the DUP are inclined to talk to the SDLP at present, in view of that incident, though Paisley insisted to me that I should nonetheless keep the process alive. All the parties are beginning to concentrate on the local government elections on 15 May. Interest is focussed on the intra-unionist contest between the UUP and the DUP and, more significantly, on the intra-nationalist struggle between the SDLP and Sinn Fein. At this time especially, the SDLP cannot afford to be out-flanked by Sinn Fein and will continue to stress that any internal arrangement must be accompanied by progress on the Anglo-Irish front.

3. Despite inevitable setbacks and distractions, a certain momentum has built up over the last year which I am anxious to maintain, and I have therefore concluded that now is the time to introduce an intermediary. I have already floated this idea with the party leaders and indeed publicly. The job of the intermediary would be to get alongside each of the parties in turn and seek to clarify in detail precisely where they agreed and where they differed. Both the Government and the parties would then be better placed, following the local government elections, to consider what arrangements might be introduced to which the parties representing most people on both sides of the community would acquiesce. This is

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self-evidently a delicate operation, requiring experience of the parties and the personalities involved. It would not be sensible for me to undertake it myself because that would inevitably result in a series of high profile meetings which would make difficult any patient and detailed exploration of the possibilities away from the glare of publicity. In any case, as you know, I am to be in the United States shortly for ten days. I believe that Chris Patten is the right choice and I have therefore asked him to undertake it.

4. I shall not be making too much of this development, which is entirely consistent with our efforts hitherto and does not constitute a new initiative. I shall probably need to announce it publicly, albeit in low key. Before doing so, however, I shall naturally inform the leaders of the Northern Ireland parties and I think it would also be wise to mention it to the Irish Government, given the link between political developments in Northern Ireland and our efforts to improve Anglo-Irish relations. My visit to Dublin next Friday with Geoffrey Howe will provide an opportunity to say rather more about this, in particular to urge the Irish to persuade John Hume to consider seriously the scope for agreement on devolution and so unblock the political process inside Northern Ireland. As you know I believe we must avoid a situation in which we reach an agreement with the Irish Government, but find the SDLP holding to a negative line in the Province.

5. I shall speak to the party leaders early this week, probably tomorrow and then probably make a short announcement when I have talked to them.

6. I am copying this minute to the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

DH.

D H
18 March 1985

Ireland. Situation



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