

*File LPO*



10 DOWNING STREET  
LONDON SW1A 2AA

*From the Private Secretary*

20 December 1989

*See reply.*

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

The Prime Minister has noted the Northern Ireland Secretary's minute of 18 December about political developments in Northern Ireland. She was grateful for this account and endorses the approach which Mr. Brooke is taking.

I am copying this letter to the Private Secretaries to the Lord President, Foreign Secretary, Home Secretary, Defence Secretary and to Sir Robin Butler.

*Yours sincerely*  
*Charles Powell*

CHARLES POWELL

Stephen Leach, Esq.,  
Northern Ireland Office.

*tl*



*Jo*

*Ri Mawhinney*  
 I think we've  
 been here before: but  
 it's worth a try.

PRIME MINISTER

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

~~CDP~~  
*Yes not* 19/11/01

In the light of recent developments, I thought it might be helpful to let you have a note about political prospects in Northern Ireland.

2. I sense that the political scene is more fluid than it has been for some time. The signs of movement are welcome and we need to be prepared to use any real opportunity there may be for political progress. You may have noticed that several of Northern Ireland's MPs spoke in the debates on the Queen's Speech and made some quite positive contributions.

3. Several developments have contributed to the change of mood. The significance of your and Tom King's meetings earlier in the year about Harland and Wolff, with all three main party leaders, did not go unnoticed. The district council and European elections in the summer were a set-back for Sinn Fein and the DUP, and good news for the SDLP and UUP. There has been a significant improvement in the atmosphere in some district councils since then, with Unionists and the SDLP entering into voluntary power-sharing arrangements on some councils.

4. The exploratory talks which Brian Mawhinney has been holding since the spring with politicians and others have helped to challenge the negative attitudes within the parties. Those discussions have confirmed that some form of devolution remains the objective most likely to command widespread support. Unionist antipathy towards the Agreement remains undiminished, but attitudes are no longer as apocalyptic as they were. Unionists are starting to talk to Ministers again on a more normal basis - I saw Ken Maginnis for a publicised talk about security recently - and this development I am of course encouraging.



5. Spurred by their poor electoral performance, the DUP have decided to make a major pitch for devolution. Peter Robinson in particular has been speaking out constructively - he has been talking about the need for "barter and compromise" and he and John Hume have demonstrated in public debates that they could do business together - although there continues to be the usual anti-Government rhetoric to counter-balance the more positive statements. A DUP team led by Robinson has now had three private meetings with officials in the last few weeks, on the understanding that the discussion would move to Ministerial level when the time is ripe.

6. At the DUP's recent party conference, Ian Paisley virtually denounced the Unionist pact, though he and Jim Molyneaux will want to stick together if they can on the Agreement and on political development. Some in the UUP now feel under pressure not to be outshone by the DUP in their desire to move forward (and Conservative Party organisation in the Province may add to the pressure - the Conservative candidate in a recent council by-election, won by the DUP, pushed the UUP into third place). But Molyneaux remains immobile. I saw him for about an hour in the Commons last week - a meeting which afterwards he virtually denied took place, claiming that he could not talk to me without the suspension of the Agreement. It remains his instinct to do nothing, pretending in public that he knows from secret contacts that the Agreement is on the way out and the Unionists' best stance, integrationist one moment and devolutionist the next, is to "wait and see".

7. Both Unionist leaders, however, continue to hark back to their "outline proposal" for a replacement "British-Irish Agreement", which envisaged a committee-based form of devolved government, with a guaranteed role for the minority and an Irish dimension, and which they discussed with Tom King early last year. We described those proposals, rightly, as a "constructive" and "encouraging" starting-point for inter-party talks, and I have confirmed that view. The problem is of course to find a basis on which those talks



can start: Robinson, with the blessing of his leader, seems genuinely interested in finding an agreed way round the Unionist 'preconditions', while Molyneaux prides himself on his immobility.

8. Hume continues to profess willingness to talk to anyone at any time, but the existence of the Agreement has encouraged him and his party to coast along. I met the three SDLP MP's last week: they were ready, they said, to do anything they could to encourage political progress, except to countenance "suspension" of the Agreement. In practice, they too may have their "preconditions" - unstated and unacknowledged, but suggested to Unionists by regular public references to "sharing this island" and the need for Unionists to talk to Dublin - which may prove as great a source of difficulty as the Unionists' own demands. Given the recent vagueness about the SDLP's commitment, however, it is notable that Seamus Mallon has been speaking so forcefully in public about the need for devolution; and all three MPs plainly see the need for purely internal political development, though Hume fears a loss of electoral support if he says so in public.

9. The sum total of all this cannot yet give us confidence that the parties are ready to negotiate seriously if they got round a table together. But there are increasing signs that they might be soon. We have demonstrated that we shall not be deflected by Unionist protests from operating the Agreement, and that we are committed to the principles which underlie it. Recent Conference meetings have, on the other hand, demonstrated that we are not to be pushed around by the Irish, although we are patient listeners. We are continuing to provide good government of the Province and will seek to do so whether local politicians contribute or not.

10. From that position of strength, it is tempting simply to let matters ride, but I think that would be a mistake. Haughey was right in the recent Dail debate - a debate notable, as our Ambassador has commented, for its lack of anti-British rhetoric - to stress the urgency of political progress in Northern Ireland.



Progress towards a political settlement could deal a powerful blow to the terrorists on both sides. "Good government" really needs the proper local input which is currently lacking. The longer it takes to achieve that input the more irresponsible local politicians become. We would be rightly criticised for doing nothing to respond to the political momentum which is now building up, and which we have helped to create.

11. There is of course an important Irish dimension. I see Haughey's stance as essentially cautious, pragmatic and opportunist. He does not speak up for devolution, he says, because there are no specific proposals on the table; and he is right when he expresses doubt about the value of initiatives by the Irish Government; but he probably also has reservations about any form of political progress within Northern Ireland, and it is Dublin politics, rather than concern for Northern Ireland, that motivates him. He seems, however, to accept that it is for us to get the ball rolling within Northern Ireland, and both our Governments have recently reaffirmed our support for political dialogue at all levels. Haughey's overtures to the Unionists are not entirely helpful - his direct approach to the three MEPs in the recent Dail debate looked ham-fisted. But the influence of the Irish on the SDLP, and vice versa, may be a crucial factor in making progress, and I intend to stress in public and in private that a flexible approach will be required from all sides to bring about worthwhile talks.

12. I am seeking gently to nudge local politicians forward, stressing in a series of speeches our overriding commitment to bring terrorism to an end, the positive role that local elected representatives could play in forwarding all our policies, and the contribution which greater political stability could make. Northern Ireland's politicians need to talk together and with Ministers about issues of government. My approach is undogmatic, and does not exclude lesser options along the road to devolution such as changes in legislative procedures or the powers of local government. The



obstacles which the Unionists have set up to talking need not, I believe, be insuperable: we have always said that the Agreement could be "operated sensitively in the interest of bringing about talks" (but sensibly not defined what that means, and it is possible that a sufficient natural gap in Conference meetings will arise in the New Year); and it should be common ground between us, the Irish and the parties that devolution would have major implications for the operation of the Agreement, and that talks would need to address external as well as internal matters. We may be able to edge forward, as we are trying to do, by building on these familiar themes in bilateral discussions with all the parties concerned.

13. I am copying this minute to Geoffrey Howe, Douglas Hurd, David Waddington, and Tom King and to Sir Robin Butler.

P.B.

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