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British working paper "The Government of Northern Ireland"

Staples of the British Embassy telephoned me this morning in connection with the Parliamentary Question replied to by Minister of State Woods in the Dáil yesterday and the subsequent supplementaries. He requested copies of the exchanges. He enquired if we would be making representations, as had been suggested in the newspaper accounts, and he requested clarification of the reference to the failure of the working paper to meet the criterion of acceptability.

Following consultations with the Department of the Taoiseach and on instructions I subsequently requested Mr. Staples to call on me. When he did so (about 12.45) I gave him the text of Dr. Woods' reply and of the unedited "blacks", which were also sent by hand to the British Ambassador at Dublin Castle, as had been requested. I also gave Mr. Staples a copy of the statement issued on behalf of the Taoiseach by the GIS last Saturday, 24 November. Copies of these texts are attached.

I emphasised to Mr. Staples the continuity in the Government's position and in particular the Government's analysis of the sequence or priority that obtained between the Government's underlying long-term objective of a solution based on the coming together of the Irish people and the more immediate, medium term objective of a system of devolved government in Northern Ireland acceptable to both parts of the community there. I pointed out that it now appeared to be the situation that the British document "The Government of Northern Ireland" had not met the test of acceptability to both sections of the community in so far as it had been rejected as a basis for the proposed conference by both the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Official Unionist Party.

I told Mr. Staples that the Government remained very anxious that a way be found to move towards a system of devolved government in Northern Ireland which would be acceptable to both parts of the

community and suggested that it was necessary that the British authorities should now re-examine the proposed basis for the conference with a view to adapting it in order to make it so acceptable.

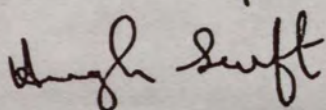
I also drew to Mr. Staples' attention that the Taoiseach had said publicly (and Mrs. Thatcher had been reported as saying much the same thing) that he would welcome an opportunity in the course of the Council to discuss Northern Ireland with Mrs. Thatcher, should time and the duties of the Presidency allow. I said that remained the position although we were not confident that time and the duties of the Presidency would so allow.

The one substantive point which Mr. Staples made by way of reply was in connection with the possibility of press publicity about the representations which we had made. I said that we did not envisage, at any rate at present, volunteering a statement about these representations. However, it was possible that, in the light of yesterday's Dail record, questions would be asked. Our probable reaction would be that there are continuing contacts between the two administrations and that such matters naturally arose in the context of such contacts but that it was contrary to normal practice to go into details. Mr. Staples requested that if we propose to say anything publicly on the matter that the British authorities be given adequate warning.

Mr. Staples reviewed, on the basis of a telex text he had, present British thinking about the conference. While some delay was now inevitable, he said, the British authorities had by no means abandoned the idea of a conference more or less along the lines already proposed. They thought that the SDLP was anxious to attend such a conference and envisaged that there would now be discussion with the leaders of the SDLP and the other political parties.

As regards paragraph 4 of the British document, Mr. Staples said the Secretary of State wished the conference to concentrate on practical issues and attainable goals, and not to become bogged down in discussion of matters on which agreement was not possible, at any rate at this stage. He said that the British authorities did not exclude reference to "the Irish dimension" but did not say anything more positive than Atkins' comments on the possibility of, for example, cross-border economic co-operation. Mr. Staples referred to paragraph 4 as ruling out Irish unity "as an option". I asked if he meant that Irish unity could be discussed as a basis for SDLP policy but he considered that this would be illogical. I referred to Mr. Atkins' statement that any discussion of Irish unity would be ruled out of order and said that remarks of this kind seemed to me to compound the difficulties of the SDLP with the British paper.

Mr. Staples also referred to Mr. Hume's reported criticisms that the British paper ruled out power-sharing. He said that, on the contrary, paragraph 32 and some of the models included power-sharing but that it was obviously impractical to envisage returning to the arrangements of 1974. I enquired if by "the arrangements of 1974" they meant arrangements including a Council of Ireland but he said that what they had in mind was precisely the arrangements internal to Northern Ireland. He was unable to resolve the contradiction between this exclusion and the apparent openness of paragraph 32.



Hugh Swift

29 November 1979