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Contacts of the New Secretary of State with
Northern Ireland Political Parties

1. I visited Northern Ireland on 29-30 May and met Dan MacAreavy and Seamus Mallon of the SDLP John Taylor and David Trimble of the OUP and John Cushnahan of the Alliance Party. The main purpose of my visit was to ascertain whether in his first round of contacts with the political parties in Northern Ireland Mr. Atkins had given any indication of his thinking or intentions.

2. The SDLP delegation had consisted of Fitt, Hume, Mallon, McGrady, Canavan and MacAreavy. The Secretary of State had been accompanied by Mr. Allison and officials. There had been some difference in emphasis in the SDLP delegation, Mallon in particular emphasising what he saw as the hopelessness of any attempt at internal arrangements and the need for a fresh start in all-Ireland terms. Michael Canavan expressed forcefully SDLP preoccupations on policing and law and order issues - the SDLP concern at the emergency legislation, police abuses during interrogation, remand and H-Block issues. The entire delegation emphasised that any attempt to introduce an upper tier of local government would be wrecked by SDLP abstention. Mr. Atkins emphasised strongly that he was there to listen. His only remarks of any substance appeared to have been to praise the power-sharing arrangements in the Derry City Council and to emphasise that the late Mr. Neave had been strongly opposed to any form of abuse of suspects on the part of the police. Mr. Allison took no part in the discussions. All the delegation were impressed by Mr. Atkins' courteous and affable manner, and were inclined to give him credit for personal resourcefulness.

3. The Alliance and OUP meetings followed the same pattern of the parties spelling out their long standing policies and preoccupatons, while Mr. Atkins emphasised his entirely apprentice role as yet and gave no indication of his policy orientation. The Alliance delegation also emphasised their opposition to any upper tier of local government.

(Mr. Allison took a more active role in that meeting, and impressed the delegation unfavourably by the naivete of his questions). The Alliance delegation also emphasised, for Mr. Atkins' benefit, that the Unionist party at home in Northern Ireland was a different matter from the urbane Conservative gentlemen who had traditionally represented Northern Ireland at Westminster and with whom Mr. Atkins was acquainted.

4. Due to the European campaign I was unable to meet any of the people who had been on/^{the}OUP delegation but from what Taylor and Trimble had learned of the meeting the OUP delegation appeared to have reiterated their concerns on security, the constitutional position and their opposition to power-sharing. Again that meeting, and presumably the DUP meeting last week, were essentially listening exercises.

5. The most active preoccupation of the people I met was understandably the European election campaign. Dan MacAreavy said that there was a tremendous spirit in the SDLP campaigners and he was very optimistic on Hume's chances (in spite of Bernadette MacAliskey, who is expected to pick up around 40,000.) Taylor is understandably worried about the division of OUP first preferences since these must be divided as evenly as possible to give him a chance, but the geographical division which leaves him to fight in the home bases of both Paisley and Kilfedder while West has a free run elsewhere hardly points to this. John Cushnahan was strongly of the view that the Paisleyite vote had peaked and consolidated at the general election figure. On existing voting figures Paisley should not get a seat, but Cushnahan may be underestimating the effect of Paisley's personal candidature, and the psychological fact that it will be possible for loyalists everywhere in Northern Ireland to give 'the big man' a personal vote. Cushnahan also mentioned that the Paisleyites had made heavy use of smear tactics in the general election, both against Napier and Craig. As to the outcome of the election, where a low poll is expected, there seemed to be a general feeling that West had a safe seat, Hume was very likely to be elected and that Paisley and Taylor would contend for the third seat, with

the existing figures in Taylor's favour but the psychological factors on Paisley's side.

6. Other minor points of interest which arose in conversation were that the police authority had asked for a meeting with the SDLP, but the SDLP had refused on the grounds that the authority was discredited by the recent resignations. Austin Currie is staying away from the political scene for the present. There seems a fairly widespread willingness to keep him within the party. If Hume wins a European seat, it is likely that the Executive meeting on 16 June will be relatively indulgent to him. If Hume should fail however there will probably be a tendency to blame Currie, and a corresponding bitterness in the debate on his future relationship with the party.

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31 May, 1979

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