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*Addition to Summary
3 of Brief*

Northern Ireland policy discussion with Mr. Humphrey Atkins

1. From contacts with political leaders in Northern Ireland and with British officials both in Dublin and London, it emerges that the British authorities are concentrating their efforts solely on the attempt to work out a devolved administration within Northern Ireland. While there is a frank admission on the part of British officials of what is also evident from other sources, namely that there are wide divergences between the positions taken up by the parties involved in Mr. Atkins' conference, hopes are apparently still entertained in London that the SDLP, the DUP and Alliance might be interested in a compromise formula. Such a formula could not correspond to the wishes of the parties but might, the British hope, be recommended by the parties to their supporters on the basis that it would be the best offer available and would represent some progress towards a devolved administration.

2. It is probable that Mr. Atkins will attempt to put across this analysis and that his presentation will rely to some extent on purported "private information" falling within the area of the conference (and parallel conference) proceedings and which Mr. Atkins and the participants have, we are informed, undertaken not to reveal (- the "self-denying ordinance" on information about the discussions which has been observed since they began). Mr. Atkins, it may be expected, will describe at some length the steps or options which may be taken in the course of the next weeks and months in the process - these are detailed in the accompanying brief.

3. What is evident from all enquiries and soundings is that the British Government at present have no intention of widening the scope of their activities in relation to Northern Ireland to include discussion of relations between Northern Ireland and this State or relations between Ireland and Britain. In the event of irretrievable breakdown of the present Atkins conference process, British officials have pointed to the likelihood that Conservative backbenchers would insist on the letter of the party manifesto, namely the restoration of increased powers to Northern Ireland local authorities.

4. From the foregoing it must be concluded that Mr. Atkins approaches the meeting as a further opportunity to have consultations with us on the whole range of mutual interests existing as a result of the Northern Ireland situation. As he expressed it on taking office, to Minister O'Kennedy, he will welcome our "interest and influence" in achieving the objective of devolved government in Northern Ireland. He will however adhere to the British stance that we have no formal right of consultation or negotiation on the future of Northern Ireland. He regards the public presentation of the meeting as sensitive and important lest reports of the discussions should upset the unionist participants in the conference process.

5. The contrast between these British attitudes and our analysis of the position and approach to the meeting could hardly be more clearcut. We have known since the conference began that the SDLP formally reserves its position on all matters discussed pending agreement on the key question of an acceptable executive power-sharing structure. Since this we know is formally excluded by the DUP (and, obviously, the OUP - whose non-participation would in any case of itself have brought the whole procedure into doubt) we could not accept that claims of progress in the talks have much validity. Moreover the key concepts of Government policy - that Northern Ireland as a political entity has failed, that the Atkins conference cannot provide a conclusive settlement of the problem and that the two sovereign Governments should work together to find a formula for permanent peace and stability in all three dimensions (within Northern Ireland, within all Ireland, within these islands) - oblige us to look beyond the conference.

6. The meeting should be used to express our views fully. In addition we might comment on the shortcomings of the British approach, but a positive presentation of our policy should set the tone. The speaking note annexed to this document contains suggested points for emphasis.

7. The leader of the SDLP, Mr. John Hume, has suggested a coming period of informal consultation with the Northern Ireland parties, of British Government deliberation and of Parliamentary

discussion is an important one and that we should strongly and urgently demand a full conference, preferably quadripartite but at least bilateral, to discuss fundamentally the issues of an inter-community solution in Northern Ireland, of North-South relations and of Irish-British relations. He suggests that we should prepare positions on all three issues and present them without delay. Mr. Hume is aware that the British are working to produce a half-way formula involving something for the minority, but reaffirms that the SDLP is only interested in executive power-sharing as of right. Mr. Hume's position corresponds to the policy adopted by the SDLP at its last Conference before the Atkins initiative was launched.

8. Mr. Hume had, during the course of the conference, expressed a degree of satisfaction with the course of events. This was presumably because of the tactical victory - establishment of the parallel conference - which enabled the SDLP to participate and the opportunity which the conference offered to expose the party's views fully knowing that they would be fully reported to the British Cabinet. The re-expression of the SDLP's strategic line at the present stage no doubt reflects an acknowledgement of the very limited progress the conference has made and the necessity to keep the support of the SDLP constituency in the nationalist community. After all, voting for a Northern Ireland assembly is to be expected possibly within this year.

9. Reference has been made by British officials to the SDLP using the Government as a monkey's paw to withdraw chestnuts from the fire. While the analogy was drawn in the context of getting concessions on a Northern Ireland devolved administration, and is we know invalid, it is necessary to refer to the possibility that Mr. Hume might himself be willing to use us as a monkey's paw in another context, namely as the agent for the destruction of the conference. A public and unqualified expression by us of the views he has submitted for our use would almost certainly wreck the conference process. The propaganda weapon which such a development would hand to the British and to Unionists in the Six Counties would be prodigious. We have an interest in allowing the conference to fail through its own inconsistencies. If there is to be "blame" it

should be seen to repose on the Northern Ireland parties alone. Accordingly it is suggested that the presentation of Government policy at the forthcoming meeting with Mr. Atkins should be confidential and that press and public should only be informed that policy was presented in detail. If a question is asked about the Atkins conference, our side should respond along the lines of the Taoiseach's Ard-Fheis speech, namely that if the conference helps to ensure civil rights and equality and impartial security operations, then so much the better.

10. Apart from the objective of avoiding propagandistic accusations from London and Belfast of "wrecking" the Atkins conference, which is however in itself important and consistent with our policy since the conference was first mooted, there is the further consideration that the Taoiseach is to meet Mrs. Thatcher at an early date after the European Council. It is not desirable that the atmosphere for that meeting should be spoilt by public, substantial disagreement at a lower level leading to an actual disruption of the present British process and to consequent propagandistic recriminations. At the worst, such developments could imperil the Head of Government meeting, which has yet to be agreed to formally by the British side.

Department of Foreign Affairs

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