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M. Murray *W. W. W. W.*
519003 *9.80* **ROINN AN TAOISIGH** *original of 511003 and Misc. F. 2*
 Uimhir..... *please* *10/9*

To: Secretary to the Government
 From: W. Kirwan

ASPECTS OF POLICY LINE AGREED BETWEEN TAOISEACH
AND SDLP

1. When the Taoiseach gave us directions on the lines to be followed and work to be done in developing Government policy on Northern Ireland, he indicated that all aspects of the guidelines need not be regarded, at this stage, as finally and definitively settled. I therefore offer comments on two aspects where I believe that some modifications in presentation may help in the pursuit of what is overall a potentially cogent and positive approach but one for which we will find it very difficult to serve the necessary degree of acceptance from the British and the Unionists. The two aspects in question relate to (1) what the SDLP say to Mr. Atkins at their meeting fixed for an early date and (2) how we would propose the envisaged Conference be convened.

2. The Taoiseach told us that the SDLP would soon be seeing Mr. Atkins and would be telling him that the discussions arising out of the White Paper were now at an end - presumably so far as their Party is concerned, I would see a danger in such a brutal statement of their position. The British have told us that the DUP have not yet completely rejected the two models of the White Paper but have submitted a comprehensive discussion paper. If the SDLP simply reject the two models simpliciter, they may expose themselves to the danger that the British will seek to publicly place the onus on them for the failure of the Atkins process. This could play into the hands of those in the British Government, in the Tory Party and elsewhere unsympathetic to the approach we and the SDLP now wish to promote and could lead such elements to press, with a possibility of success, the alternative courses such as progressive devolution, starting with an election for a purely consultative assembly or, even worse, a return to Airey Neave's ideas of greater powers for local authorities. It is not to be excluded by any means that the Northern

Mr. Kirwan
7 discussed
these points to day
with the Taoiseach
9/9
 Note
he really told
me that on the
joint invitation
point he had
simply suggested
to the Taoiseach
that we should
not get hung
up on it; that
the SDLP point,
this was a matter
for that party
but
10.9.80

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Ireland Office has already prepared contingency plans for such approaches.

3. One can understand that the SDLP wish to administer a sufficiently arresting shock to the Atkins process to direct British mainstream thinking into radically different channels. It may be possible, however to do so in a way that would shift the onus back towards the British and the unionists. They could tell the British that their clear understanding is that both the main unionist parties reject the executive power-sharing option which in itself could be acceptable to the SDLP only in a much wider context, taking full account of the North-South and Anglo-Irish dimensions; that they (the SDLP) find the other option unacceptable; that they are unaware of any other constructive and acceptable proposals from any side; and that unless the British have such proposals or know of them, the SDLP see little point in the continuation of the contacts being made by Mr. Atkins within the present context; that, however, they remain open to consider any acceptable proposals but that in their absence they are confirmed in their view that an approach based on a reappraisal of existing premises should now be considered by the British. If the Taoiseach agrees that an approach along these lines would secure the same objective while minimising risks, it would be necessary to convey his view to the SDLP before they meet Atkins. If the meeting is not to take place before next weekend, we could convey it to Mr. Currie when we see him at Oxford.

4. One can understand the view that the change in the British stance we and the SDLP seek would be well symbolised by joint issue of the invitations to the proposed conference by the British and Irish Governments. I would comment, however, that it is almost certainly hoping for too much. The whole position of the British Government and of the Tory Party as to the ultimate responsibility of Westminster runs counter to this idea. Their doctrine may be anathema to us but we will have a sufficiently difficult task in persuading them to convene a conference without jeopardising the prospects of doing so for what is after all, only a matter of form or symbolism. Even if the British

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were otherwise disposed to accept the idea, joint issue of invitations might well be enough to tip the scales against unionist attendance. I strongly recommend that this idea - which is essentially a matter for the Government here and not the SDLP - be dropped or, at least, left in abeyance.

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9 September, 1980.