

SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES OF CABINET DISCUSSION ON TUESDAY, 21 MARCH 1972
(CONCLUSIONS 1972/14, ITEM 7)

PRESENT: The Prime Minister
The Minister in the Senate
The Minister of Finance
The Minister of Health and Social Services
The Minister of Education
The Minister of Agriculture
The Minister of Commerce
The Minister of Development
The Minister of Community Relations
The Minister of State at the Ministry of Finance
The Minister of State at the Department of the Prime Minister
The Attorney General

ALSO PRESENT: The Secretary to the Cabinet
The Government Security Adviser
The Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet
The Principal

Referring to his visit to Downing Street on the following day, the Prime Minister said that his case rested on the letters of 16 February and 1 March which he had sent to the United Kingdom Prime Minister. In the course of a telephone conversation with Mr Heath a few days' previously he (Mr Faulkner) had suggested that some indication of the likely topics for discussion would be of help, but Mr Heath had not committed himself, saying that none of the ideas was firm enough for reduction to paper. The Prime Minister thought that consultation rather than announcement of decisions was what was in Mr Heath's mind - indeed he thought that it would be unrealistic after weeks of independent study for him to be expected to accept any new ideas on the strength of a one-day meeting. He took the view that the Government of Northern Ireland's carefully-evolved recommendations deserved firm decisions and that it would be wrong to look to interim measures aimed at getting the SDLP to the conference table but keeping the public in a state of suspense for months longer. In the words of the Minister of Development, the whole package should be unwrapped at once.

Speculating about the probable strength of the Westminster 'team' at the meeting, the Minister of Development stressed the collective responsibility of Ministers and urged that the Northern Ireland delegation should be enlarged. The Prime Minister, supported by other Ministers, however, was of the opinion

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that while one colleague could reinforce his arguments at the meeting and confirm his impressions afterwards, the appearance of a sizeable delegation could be construed as representative of total Cabinet opinion and therefore able to give immediate decisions. There was merit, the Prime Minister thought, in being able to fall back on the need to consult his Cabinet colleagues. The Minister of Development and the Minister of State at the Prime Minister's Department both stressed the importance of there being no announcement until the proposals had been discussed by the full Cabinet.

Urging that the Prime Minister's approach, while based on the two agreed letters, should not be entirely passive, the Minister of Commerce suggested that strong representations should be made about the need to bring pressure on the Government of the Republic to take action against known IRA leaders.

The Ministers of Commerce and Finance both gave instances of Whitehall procrastination in financial and economic matters which amounted to a form of political blackmail.

On the question of a United Kingdom Minister responsible for Northern Ireland affairs, the Prime Minister distinguished between the appointment of a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, instead of the present arrangements, which could be of advantage to Northern Ireland, and a Resident Minister which could only be interpreted as an expression of no confidence in the Government of Northern Ireland and indeed tantamount to direct rule.

The Minister of Agriculture associated himself with the recently expressed views of Mr Enoch Powell that "initiatives" equalled "abdication" and contended that the United Kingdom Government had not fully honoured the security obligations entered into by its predecessors in 1969 and that the Army appeared to be inhibited by the fear of press and television comment. The Prime Minister and the Minister in the Senate rejected these views, pointing out that the level of assistance required was far beyond anything foreseen in 1969 and that there was no evidence of any reluctance on the part of the Army to pursue their aims with vigour.

Reverting to the Paper submitted by the Head of the Civil Service on 18 February the Minister of Community Relations wondered whether there were not some further ideas in it worth pursuing, but the Prime Minister pointed out that all the ideas in that Paper had been very carefully considered before the preparation of the letter of 1 March to Mr Heath.

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The Minister of State at the Ministry of Finance expressed the view that the United Kingdom Government lacked the political resolution to tackle the problem Londonderry and the Border and that they should exert financial pressure on the Republic and abolish the specially favoured electoral position of citizens of the Republic living in Great Britain.

Calling it "rule by the media" over the last six weeks, the Minister of State at the Prime Minister's Department said that such a state of affairs was a great handicap to responsible Government. He expressed his unqualified support for the Prime Minister and the Minister in the Senate in their presentation of Northern Ireland's case as already submitted in the two letters to Mr Heath. These proposals were well reasoned and not of the ad hoc type previously arrived at in response to particular situations. It was important that violence should not be seen to prevail as not only Northern Ireland and Great Britain but people in many European countries were anxiously awaiting the outcome. He agreed with the view expressed earlier by the Minister of Community Relations that responsible Catholic opinion would not require much persuasion to re-align itself with the Government.

Suggesting that this was an over-optimistic view, the Minister of Agriculture thought that preparations should be made for either of two extreme situations - an anti-climax causing major trouble by Republican supporters or such radical solutions being imposed on the Government that it would have to seriously consider its position collectively and individually.

Outlining the likely course of events at the Downing Street meeting, the Prime Minister indicated that there would be two sessions with a break between 2 00 pm and 5 00 pm during which UK Ministers would be in Parliament for the Budget debate. He imagined Mr Heath would bring in suggestions over and above those already proposed by the Government of Northern Ireland but that he would not force them unduly. He (Mr Faulkner) would be willing to have an immediate announcement if the solutions simply followed the lines already advanced by the Government of Northern Ireland or included such new items as the appointment of a Secretary of State which was an internal matter for the UK Government and not to the detriment of Northern Ireland, but he would certainly wish to return home for consultations should there be any significant departure from the ideas already submitted to the UK Government. In such an event a Cabinet Meeting would be required on the following day as Mr Heath would no doubt be anxious to have the announcement made before the week-end.

Taking a different line from his colleagues, the Attorney General did not see the following day's talks as being crucial in themselves, but as the forerunner of a series of consultations and argued against the adoption of a dogmatic attitude which could lose the Government of Northern Ireland the much-needed support of the Conservative Party at Westminster.

The Minister of Development took the opposing view that after months of deliberation the Government had come to firm conclusions and could not now with respect and integrity carry on under substantially different conditions to those agreed.

The Prime Minister mentioned that two valuable initiatives already suggested by the Government of Northern Ireland had not been recently canvassed in the press, ie the replacement of the Special Powers Act by new legislation and the introduction of a Bill of Rights.

In a discussion on the operation of proportional representation for the House of Commons at Stormont, Ministers sensed that there was less pressure than hitherto from the SDLP for this innovation and little enthusiasm in the United Kingdom Government where pressure for similar reform could be an embarrassment.

The meeting concluded with the making of arrangements for communication with Ministers during the Prime Minister's absence.