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CC PS/SOS (B&L) M
PS/Ministers (B&L) M
PS/Mr Woodfield (B&L) M
PS/Mr Bell ✓
Mr Blelloch
Mr Marshall M
Mr Wyatt
Mr Angel M
Mr Bloomfield
Mr Chesterton M
Mr Shepherd M

POL 354/10 RA

21 OCT 1981
1808 JTB
MUFAXED

Immediate MUFAX
please to PS/SJS (L) and
all other holders responsible
from UB Council PS/SJS(B)

MEETING TO DISCUSS THE POSSIBILITIES FOR CONSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT, STORMONT CASTLE, 19 OCTOBER 1981

Present:

- Secretary of State
- Lord Gowrie
- Mr Butler
- Mr Woodfield
- Mr Bell
- Mr Marshall
- Mr Blelloch
- Mr Wyatt
- Mr Bloomfield
- Mr Chesterton
- Mr Boys Smith

Miss Anis
To see and return file.
WJS 22/10.

The meeting had before it Mr Woodfield's note to the Secretary of State of 2 October.

2. The Secretary of State wished to take stock of thinking on constitutional affairs in the context among other things of what he believed to be a changing climate of opinion. On the minority side this changing climate could be helped by placing more emphasis on cross-border activities, which need not of themselves call the status of the border into question, and by encouraging development of Anglo-Irish relations but in an open way and involving Northern Ireland politicians. In the Secretary of State's view the full integration of Northern Ireland with Great Britain and a return to Stormont in the form in which it had existed until 1972 were not practicable, and more thought need not be given to them. He was also sceptical about the indefinite continuation of the present system of direct rule set against a background of the guarantee and of Government neutrality towards both the preservation of the union and Irish unity in whatever form. This suggested that attention should be given to the development of ideas in two areas: first, on association with the Republic (on which there were a range of options), and second on seeking to maintain steady momentum for political progress building on proportional representation power sharing.

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3. The following points were noted in discussion of the present situation and of the background to any possible future moves:

(i) the climate of opinion had changed. There were more pressures - both economic and political - on the majority community, which was now more self-questioning. Members of the majority were tending to move from certain parts of the Province and more were leaving Northern Ireland permanently. Some were increasingly perceiving that there was value in building relations with the Republic, bearing in mind that the London/Dublin axis was likely to continue to be promoted. There was also a recognition that British public opinion was tending to become less well disposed towards Northern Ireland than it had been. Some were seeing that the union was not tenable in the form in which it had once existed, not least because it took two to make a union. This all suggested that the London/Dublin axis could be built on and that the Belfast/Dublin axis could be developed: an example of the latter was the gas pipeline;

(ii) the present economic situation was serious. Potential investors might balk at putting money in Northern Ireland because of fears about the Province's future or its stability. This should be borne in mind in giving thought to the timing of any possible political development;

(iii) tensions had been higher in the Province in the past than they were now. But against that political structures had hardened: in 1973 for example moderate Unionists had worked with the SDLP in a way which was hard to conceive of in present circumstances;

(iv) UK Governments had in recent years left open how things might develop. This had tended to encourage a spirit of perpetual bargaining. The time might have come for the parameters to discussion to be more clearly established. It was also for consideration whether the Government should seek to address itself more to people at large and less to

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the leaders of political parties;

(v) future policy should be tested against realities and should not seek to run counter to local perceptions of self-interest. Amongst such realities were the fear the majority community had for its future in any arrangement involving closer association with the Republic. The Protestants would always be the dominant force in Northern Ireland, and whatever constitutional arrangements might be devised, were unlikely willingly in the long run to share power effectively. Power sharing seemed moreover unlikely to be a route forward to a more fundamental reordering of relations in Northern Ireland. Against this it needed to be remembered that the minority community have never fully accepted the system established after 1920. The recent opening up of Anglo-Irish relations was however a material step forward on which developments could if possible be built. But there was a long way to go before the majority of Northern Ireland Protestants saw the South as an acceptable neighbour with whom there could be open, full and routine co-operation. In addition, it should not be forgotten that it was the Republic which had gone its own way in many respects in the years since partition and that politicians in the Republic were on many occasions keen to emphasise the respects in which they were different;

(vi) the long term defeat of terrorism was an exercise which would involve the minority community beyond any immediate security measures. It thus had a political dimension bearing on the minority's long standing sense of alienation;

(vii) the fears and aspirations of the Protestant majority were not clearly expressed but touched on both a sense of Britishness and on association with Northern Ireland territorially. Citizenship and territoriality were in fact distinct and should be so seen in considering any possible future formulation of the guarantee that might be judged necessary. Moreover,

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the guarantee itself had evolved over the years and had been differently formulated at different times;

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(viii) a further factor to be remembered was the extent to which the homework of political debate in the Republic and in Northern Ireland was similar and in both cases different from that in Great Britain.

4. The following points were noted in discussion of factors bearing on possible future political and constitutional development:

(i) notwithstanding the difficulties associated with power sharing, and particularly with seeking to revive it in present circumstances, it had to be remembered that there were few other options for development within a Province under UK sovereignty. Thus to rule out power sharing might be in effect to rule out devolved Government;

(ii) one aim in any long term development could be the re-ordering of relations within Ireland, enabling both the Republic and Northern Ireland, and the communities within them, to hold to part at least of their aspirations. A closer association now between the Republic and Northern Ireland would require adjustments in both places, given that despite cross-border activities the two had gone their separate ways over the years;

(iii) a distinction should be made between establishing a goal and a means of reaching it. It was for consideration which was the easier to establish;

(iv) thought might be given to the existing measures of co-operation between the UK and the Republic, such as reciprocal tax agreements, to see how far they indicated ways in which relations might be strengthened.

5. Summing up the discussion the Secretary of State made the following points:

(i) in his view energetic efforts against terrorism were essential to maintain confidence in the North and so in any

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process which involved establishing closer relations with the Republic. The Government had to ensure that all was done which reasonably could be done, and that there was a high degree of public awareness of the measures being taken;

(ii) he remained of the view that integration with Great Britain and the restoration of the old style Stormont were not practicable propositions. Thought should be given to how far this should be spelt out, and at what stage. In his view also the continuation of direct rule in perpetuity was not practicable;

(iii) any developments had to be seen as a package, each element being balanced by others. The real difficulty in the last resort would be obtaining the correct balance. The improving of relations between the Republic and both Northern Ireland and the UK as a whole was central to the development of such a package. Proving of Anglo-Irish relations had to be judged for its effect on relations between the North and the South;

(iv) the Secretary of State would like to resume the discussion in due course. He wanted to give thought to the idea of establishing an economic forum, involving Northern Ireland politicians, the possibility of giving additional powers to district councils, and the kind of change needed in both North and South if they were to work more closely together. He would also like to examine what might in practice be meant by a reordering of relations within Ireland.

for *Neil Connors*
S W BOYS SMITH
Private Secretary
21 October 1981

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