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DRAFT

cc. PS/SOS (B&L)
PS/Ministers (B&L)
NI Perm Secs
Mr Stephens
Mr Brennan
Mr Chesterton
Mr Gilliland
Mr Merifield
Mr Ferneyhough
Mr Spence
Mr M Elliott
Miss F Elliott
Mr Ehrman

PUS (B&L)

THE POLITICAL DEBATE IN NI

I have been reflecting further about the direction of the political debate in NI in the light of the exchanges at your meeting earlier this week with NI Permanent Secretaries and of a paper which Anthony Merifield has issued to the Political Developments Group after discussion with Ronnie Spence and me.

I remain very pessimistic about the mood of the vast majority of the Protestant community. They feel deeply wounded and betrayed by the Anglo-Irish Agreement; these feelings seem to exist right across the Province and amongst all levels in the Protestant community. Very few are willing to give the Agreement even a chance to prove itself. We would be deluding ourselves if we believed that a "hearts and minds" campaign to sell the Agreement will make much impact or that a few Church Ministers or academics expressing mildly encouraging noises will make any significant impact. In this very serious situation, the Unionist leaders have little difficulty in mounting an all-out assault on HMG and the will of the UK Parliament; the Protestant

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man in the street seems to believe that Parliament can be persuaded to change its mind when it realises the strength of Unionist opposition and sees that the Agreement has not defeated the terrorists.

There is little appreciation that the logic of the position of several Unionist leaders is to break the Union and I am alarmed at the way in which UDI is now being openly discussed. Those politicians who do appreciate the point are either not heeded or are afraid to speak too loudly lest they merely encourage the hot-heads. There is already evidence of industrial and commercial concerns becoming cautious about investment in NI because of doubts about the area's long-term future. Many of us have heard friends talking quietly about the wisdom of continuing to live in NI or about encouraging their children to seek employment or higher education in GB.

It is against this background that I believe we need to try to alter the direction and tone of the political debate in NI. We have to get away from the destructive opposition of the DUP/OUP, to make people face up to the grave risk of a drift towards a breaking of the Union, to raise the debate to a more adult level, and to draw the SDLP into a much more positive stance. In particular, I think that Ministers should seek in coming days and weeks to bring out two major issues:-

- (1) The Union. The Unionist community has to be told forcefully and clearly that their political leaders are taking them down a very dangerous path in seeking to defy the will of Parliament. The nationalist community and the Irish Government have to face the very real danger of a Protestant dominated "independent Ulster". Ministers should, therefore, start to

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challenge the drift towards UDI and to ask questions like - who will finance an independent NI; who will provide the money to keep H&W going; who will subsidise your electricity costs and housing rents; who will maintain your health and education services at present levels; who will pay your security forces; where are financial incentives to attract new jobs coming from; who will safeguard your salaries in public sector jobs; how are your children's education needs to be financed; is your pension safe etc etc. In developing these points, Ministers would have to guard against giving the impression that the rest of the UK regarded NI people as "spongers".

- (2) Political progress. The Unionist community has to be reminded again and again that the Anglo-Irish Agreement exists partly because of the failure of their political leaders to give the nationalist community a fair and reasonable role in NI. The Unionists have, therefore, an alternative way forward and that is to find a better method of accommodating the needs and aspirations of the minority. Ministers could stress that devolution would reduce the position of the Irish Government through the Conference in the government of NI and would give a NI Administration a place at the negotiating table with the Irish Government on devolved matters. I would also be prepared to go further and to offer the prospect in 1986 of a referendum on new "power-sharing" arrangements for internal administration in NI as well as new elections to the Assembly.

I have no doubt that this is a high risk approach or that colleagues will be able to list

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the serious obstacles and dangers. But I judge the situation to be grave and to justify the taking of high risks.

K P BLOOMFIELD

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