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From the Private Secretary

4 June 1986

Dear Jim,

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

(5 JUNE).

The Prime Minister held a meeting this morning to discuss the Northern Ireland Secretary's minute of 29 May on the future of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Lord President, the Foreign Secretary, the Home Secretary, the Northern Ireland Secretary, the Chief Whip and Sir Robert Armstrong were present.

The Northern Ireland Secretary said that the Northern Ireland Assembly was failing to carry out its statutory functions; rather it was being used exclusively as a platform to campaign against the Anglo-Irish Agreement in extravagant terms. Its behaviour was disreputable and was increasingly recognised as such in Northern Ireland itself. Its activities were also making the Government look ridiculous. A decision was required soon on whether to dissolve the Assembly prematurely. If it was allowed to run on until July, there would in practice - because of the parliamentary timetable - be no way of avoiding fresh elections to the Assembly in October. Such elections could well be disruptive, and there would be little likelihood of SDLP participation. It would be preferable for the Government to be able to control the timing of future elections. A decision to dissolve the Assembly was probably best taken and debated in Parliament before the marching season in the province; once the season started reactions to such a decision were likely to be the more inflammatory. It would be argued that the people of Northern Ireland were being deprived of their democratic institutions and left with no peaceful outlet for expressing opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. It would be necessary to emphasise in the Government's statements that the Assembly was being dissolved and not abolished; that the Government remained ready to hold elections at the right moment; and that the Government's offer of talks with the Unionist leaders was still on the table. It might also be possible to say that the Government would look at alternative means for consulting opinion in Northern Ireland while the Assembly was in abeyance. He hoped that his colleagues would agree that the necessary Order in Council to dissolve the Assembly should be laid very shortly and take effect from the end of the month.

In discussion there was general agreement that it would be right to dissolve the Assembly prematurely. It had gone down in popular esteem in Northern Ireland. It was widely recognised that its members were drawing money but failing to do their proper job. Dissolution was, on balance, unlikely to be a matter of major controversy in Northern Ireland.

But the decision would need to be presented with finesse. The distinction between dissolution and abolition would need to be clearly explained. The Government should emphasise that it remained committed to the aim of devolution. It might also express the hope of being able to bring the Assembly back in an improved form. Consideration should be given to further measures, attractive to Unionist opinion, which might be announced at the same time. Possible measures which deserved to be considered were: a conference of church leaders: establishment of a Council of Northern Ireland (perhaps on the model of the Advisory Council set up in the early days of direct rule) as an outlet for Unionist views: a renewed offer of talks with Unionist leaders: and announcement of the Government's intention to convene a Roundtable Conference on devolution. It would also be important to secure the most precise possible commitment from the SDLP to participate in future elections to the Assembly (bearing in mind that the Government's leverage over the SDLP would be greatest before the announcement of an intention to dissolve the Assembly). The Government's proposals would need to be explained carefully in advance to its own backbenchers, particularly those connected with Northern Ireland affairs, as well as some leading Opposition representatives.

The Prime Minister concluded that, while those present generally supported the Northern Ireland Secretary's intention to dissolve the Assembly, the implications of the decision were considerable. The matter should therefore be discussed by OD on 9 June and by Cabinet on 12 June. The Northern Ireland Secretary should circulate a paper for OD drawing on the points made in discussion.

I am copying this letter to Joan MacNaughton (Lord President's Office), Robert Culshaw (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Stephen Boys Smith (Home Office), Murdo Maclean (Chief Whip's Office) and Michael Stark (Cabinet Office).

*Yours sincerely,
Charles Powell*

Charles Powell

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Northern Ireland Office.