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PS/Secretary of State (L&B) - M

cc PS/Mr Scott (L&B) - M  
PS/Dr Mawhinney (L&B) - M  
PS/PUS (L&B) - M  
PS/Mr Bloomfield - M  
Mr Brennan - M  
Mr Chesterton - M  
Mr Spence  
Mr Gilliland  
Mr Bell - M  
Mr Wood - M  
Mr McConnell

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UNIONIST PETITION TO HER MAJESTY

Mr Ward's minute of 8 January asks me to submit recommendations for a statement which the Secretary of State wishes to consider issuing on 12 January about the Unionist petition. I have consulted Mr McConnell.

2. PAB's political developments analysis dated 7 January (PAB(87)1) gives a full account of the petition. Briefly, it is another attempt to demonstrate the extent and solidarity of Unionist opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Launched with an attempt at pomp and circumstance in Belfast City Hall on 2 January by the Unionist leaders, the petition will now be touted round from door to door for signature and will be available in church halls and other public buildings in Northern Ireland on Saturday 17 January when more signatures can be added. The total number of signatures collected is to be announced on 23 January and the petition transmitted to the Palace at the end of the month. There have been threats of serious civil disobedience with the possibility of strike action if the petition is ignored.

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3. The petition has been cleverly drafted. It does not, in direct terms, oppose the Agreement. Instead it deplors the removal of democracy from Northern Ireland and the fact that one part of the United Kingdom is administered differently from the rest. The fact that the petition is so worded as to support the democratic process renders it rather less easy to attack. The organisers of the petition will suggest that anyone who favours democracy may happily sign the document. But they choose to ignore the democratically-expressed view of the democratically-elected Parliament of the United Kingdom, and the proposition that for an administration to be sensitive, effective and stable it must reflect the views and wishes of all sections of the community.

4. I submit a draft based on these considerations, as requested. However I am personally far from certain that any statement of this kind will have very much effect on the conduct or the outcome of the exercise, and fear that current Unionist attitudes towards the Government may mean that a statement by the Secretary of State results only in the hardening of opinion in favour of the petition. I believe in particular that to make much play with the argument that the Secretary of State is Her Majesty's Appointee (Mr Ward's minute) would in practice simply infuriate Unionist opinion. There is also a risk that too much emphasis on the right of a minority to be consulted would merely provoke the retort that in signing the Agreement HMG did not take sufficient account of the views of that minority of the UK's total population which the Unionists constitute. The Secretary of State may wish to discuss these points at the Presentational Strategy Group meeting.

*Mark Elliott*

M ELLIOTT

9 January 1987

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UNIONIST PETITION: DRAFT STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE

The organisers of this petition are not being honest about their real purpose. They are not, as they claim to be, defending democracy in Northern Ireland. On the contrary, it is they who have opted out of the democratic process at Westminster and in many of Northern Ireland's Council Chambers. It is they who so abused the privileges of the Northern Ireland Assembly that the Government had no choice but to bring it to an end.

True democracy does not mean the automatic implementation of decisions which a majority wants, with no attention to the interests of the minority. Those in positions of responsibility must be sensitive to the wishes and needs of all those with a legitimate interest. We do not need petitions to tell us that many are unhappy - but we would welcome the chance to discuss in detail the reasons for that unhappiness and to explore ways in which it might be alleviated.

In the United Kingdom the supreme expression of democracy is Parliament. The democratically-elected Members of Parliament represent the will of the people. The Ministers of the Crown, to whom executive power is entrusted by the Sovereign, are responsible to Parliament. And Parliament, by an overwhelming majority, supported the Anglo-Irish Agreement. No petition can alter that simple fact.

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