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Mrs. Margaret Thatcher and Conservative attitude on
Political Initiative in Northern Ireland

1. Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, the Leader of the Conservative and Unionist Party and the Leader of the Opposition since February 1975, was born in 1925. She was educated at Grantham High School and Oxford and was called to the Bar in 1954. She married in December 1951 and has a son and daughter. She contested Dartford in 1950 and 1951 under her maiden name Roberts before being elected in 1959 for Finchley. From 1961 to 1964 she was Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Pensions and National Insurance and from June 1970 to 1974 she was Secretary of State for Education and Science and a member of the Privy Council. While in Opposition she has been front bench spokesman and a shadow Minister for various Ministries. Since becoming Leader she has visited the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, India, Pakistan, China, Japan, Hong Kong and Northern Ireland. Following a General Election on 3 May 1979, she became Prime Minister having obtained 339 seats in Parliament.

2. The policies of the Conservative Party in relation to Northern Ireland derive from the Party's October 1976 general guideline document, entitled "The Right Approach", which commits the party to co-operate with the Northern Ireland political parties in the search for a stable constitutional system and to encourage talks to pave the way for a devolved form of Government. The document made no reference to power-sharing.

3. Mrs. Thatcher's major statement on Northern Ireland policy is the attached speech given in Belfast on 19 June 1978 (Annex 1). She set out her Party's plans to restore the upper tier of local government which was removed in October 1973. (Certain regional powers appertaining to education, health, welfare, planning, roads, motor taxation, water and sewerage, tourism, electoral arrangements, gas, electricity, transport, harbours and fire were taken away from local government under the Local Government Act (NI) of 1972.

These regional functions are now vested in the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and are exercised by the appropriate Ministries and Statutory Bodies under his control resulting in a total absence of local accountability in the exercise of these functions). Mrs. Thatcher said that her party will seek to establish one or more directly elected Regional Councils having a wide range of powers similar to those which local authorities have in Britain so that local councillors would thus be able to perform the same role in Northern Ireland as they do elsewhere. She also said that the Regional Councils would exercise control over the area boards and that there will be scope for all political parties to participate in the new institutions.

4. Mrs. Thatcher has also emphasised the security situation in her speech. She has said that the attitude of successive Irish Governments to the problem of extradition has imposed constraints on the work of the security forces and courts. She said that "we must go on trying to persuade the Irish Government to revise its views".

5. The Conservative Party Manifesto of May 1979 devotes only one paragraph to Northern Ireland (Annex II) and emphasises that its future still depends on the defeat of terrorism and the restoration of law and order.

6. Mr. Atkins in an address to the British Irish Association on 20 July 1979 (Annex III) drew attention to four things which cannot be done:-

"First, we cannot in Northern Ireland's special circumstances again contemplate a simple return to the Stormont system, even though it existed for 50 years. I am already satisfied that this would now be completely unacceptable to a substantial section of the Northern Ireland community.

Second, we cannot integrate Northern Ireland completely with the rest of the United Kingdom. Neither the mainland British, nor majorities in both parts of the community in Northern Ireland nor the Southern Irish would be content to see Northern Ireland wholly integrated within the United Kingdom.

Third there is no way in which it would be possible (even assuming, for the moment, that this was an objective of our policy) to make the re-unification of Ireland the be-all and end-all of our political activity. There can be no practical prospect of achieving that objective so long as the over-whelming majority in the North are opposed to it. And, again leaving aside the question of whether HMG wished to achieve a united Ireland there is no honourable way for a government to put pressure on its subjects to agree to give up their status.

Moreover, in present circumstances I am convinced that too much talk about Irish unity in the context of my current talks with party leaders is likely simply to ensure a complete absence of any political movement. We all recognise that any change in constitutional arrangements must have majority consent if it is to be successful. That is the practical reality, and the existence of a statement to this effect in a Westminster statute is simply a statement of fact. Its removal could only increase tension.

Fourth, we cannot withdraw the troops as a political gesture. There would be neither logic nor morality in so doing. United Kingdom troops are there because Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and people there are faced with a terrorist threat which the police cannot deal with on their own."

He also said that he cannot give any clear indication of what positive proposals may eventually emerge but if progress is to be made towards the creation of new forms of Government in Northern Ireland, that answer will only be found by and with the people of Northern Ireland themselves. They must realise - on both sides - that they cannot have all that they want.

Department of Foreign Affairs

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