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CONFIDENTIAL

2nd May 1979

*Taoiseach,
This is an informal
note.*

4/5

Dear David

As you can imagine FCO and NIO officials have been busy in the past few weeks preparing briefing for a new administration.

The following notes are based on a conversation this week with Newington (FCO) and a very brief word with Marshall (NIO). I hope to see the latter, who has a closer ear to policy, for a perhaps more informative talk next week.

The impression I was given is that the limitations of direct rule as a viable avenue for progress over any further period of time will be put pretty clearly to the incoming Secretary of State. The risks of alternative courses will be put equally clearly. But, in general, the line of briefing that seems probable is that all is far from well in the present situation and that a new political initiative will have to be tried.

The view still seems to obtain that, on the political front, moves towards devolved power-sharing/partnership government remain the only avenue offering real progress; and that any exploration of more limited initiatives, such as study of enlarged local government powers, will have to take this into account. The uncertainty, however, not to say scepticism, about how prospects of substantive power-sharing can be worked successfully into any new initiative seems as strong as ever. In particular there is uncertainty about the degree of pressure with which such an initiative can credibly be

applied. There is a constant refrain that the applications of "threat" to such an initiative e.g. the suggestion that its failure might entrain a profound reappraisal of the British position on Northern Ireland, is not on. At the same time it seems to be recognised that unless a new initiative is pursued with evident determination it will make no headway with the Northern Ireland parties and, furthermore, will rule out hoped-for cooperation from our side.

Although officials can still only speculate about how the election outcome may offer any room at all to advance an early new power-sharing effort, their hope remains that, if a determined new push in this direction were forthcoming, we might be prepared to give it the benefit of the doubt and to play down, in the short term at least, Irish dimension aspects. It is not foreseen that the Irish Government will change its view of the longer term directions that are necessary nor the context in which these must be sought; but the hope persists that we might be prepared to reduce the emphasis on this while, and if, a genuinely credible push for partnership devolution were underway.

Another scenario which seems to feature in official thinking is the idea of some new move towards a majority rule administration, linked with substantial "safeguards" for the minority, which would have associated with it further steps in the Irish dimension context. There seems to be one view in the NIO that this is the course offering the best prospect for practical advance: that view appears based on the thesis that the moderate voice in Northern Ireland - centring, as the NIO may see it, on Alliance and moderate Unionism but not excluding the SDLP if the Irish dimension is included in some form - is considerably stronger than political rhetoric suggests. And that, while this voice could as well, in certain circumstances, be supportive of a power-sharing solution, the present pressures against this solution from the extremes make the other (majority rule administration plus Irish dimension links) a more practicable possibility. The

view against this in the NIO - and it has looked the prevailing argument - is that to explore this course would run head-on into the areas most firmly rejected on one side or other of the political divide and would be a sure recipe for stalemate and enhanced antagonisms.

What officials still seem unprepared to consider as a practical possibility is a way forward in the immediate which would combine a firm new push towards acceptable devolved Government with discussion of new North/South institutional links. In expressing this view they are quick to add that of course North/South economic links could and should be further developed where practical advantage to both sides is evident. But they continue to maintain that any new emphasis on the Irish dimension or exploration of longer term Irish links is a death-knell for prospects of devolved government.

These views are expressed against the 'floating' background of present days and the way in which policy will actually be presented at official level will, of course, depend on the make-up of the new administration and the person in charge of Northern Ireland affairs. If Labour returns to power, the continuity aspect will have an inherent initial profile and any internal comment on the non-viability of direct rule will have to be presented accordingly. However, the NIO does not, of course, expect Mason to return and anticipates fresh attitudes and ambitions from a new man (Hattersley is most frequently mentioned). Likewise, a Tory incumbent will carry with him the lines of Conservative policy to date including the ideas for a study of wider local government powers. But here too the NIO see in the personality of a new Secretary of State (Gilmour and Howell are the two names most frequently mentioned) potential for broader thinking. Naturally, in informal discussion with the Embassy, there is a disposition for exploration of ideas over a wider range which may go well beyond what, in reality, NIO caution is prepared to consider. Senior NIO officials

are inevitably reluctant to entertain proposals which could put at risk the containment policies they have been following in recent years and which, for all their inadequacies, they feel still have substantial support in Northern Ireland: their reluctance is the greater when, as they consider, the political backing to face the consequences of a failure of a new initiative is not yet evident. But it is evident that officials recognise that new thinking will be required with a new administration and, not least, because our Government will be demanding it. Formally, there is a tendency to write off the recent O'Neill affair as an "incident" but Callaghan's careful handling of it illustrates the awareness of the importance of American thinking.

I might mention here that, according to No. 10 sources, the Prime Minister has been intensely affronted and angered by the persistent heckling he has had on Northern Ireland at election meetings. The same sources have even suggested that the Prime Minister is not a man to forget these things and that they could affect him personally towards some obduracy on more radical thinking on Northern Ireland hereafter. This kind of marginal comment probably reflects more the irritation of aides at any grit in the campaign machine. But I mention it as comment reaching us through a third party.

There will be close scrutiny here of the way in which voting goes in Northern Ireland constituencies. Support for Alliance and the Republican Clubs will probably be watched particularly closely. Officials are obviously intrigued and concerned about the possibility that the elections could just conceivably result in the failure of any representative from the minority community being returned to Westminster. They have remarked that, in such an eventuality, there would have to be considerable re-writing of briefs.

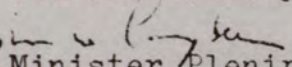
The European Elections' results are also awaited with great interest particularly for indications of a larger "middle ground"

voice which, persistently, tends to be looked for particularly in Alliance support.

The timing of the European Elections may influence the view here on an appropriate date for a first meeting between our Minister and the new NIO incumbent. It is considered by some officials at least that, if there is to be a new initiative for devolved government, it can not seriously be discussed with the Northern Ireland political parties before the European Elections and that, for this reason, it might be better to envisage a first Ministerial contact after those Elections i.e. in the latter part of June. All this, however, is obviously very tentative. Officials here do seem to think it important that the message should be conveyed to us quickly after the election that early Ministerial discussions will be welcome. It is possible this should be treated in confidence - that they (or at least the FCO) might see some value as a gesture in suggesting that the first contact be in Dublin rather than here.

The FCO is, of course, aware that the Taoiseach will be in London on a private visit on May 10th. They have indicated that they will be conveying the message to No. 10 immediately after May 3rd with the recommendation that, if at all possible, the new Prime Minister should arrange to see the Taoiseach, even if briefly, while he is here. There are problems on the timing as it coincides with a visit by Chancellor Schmidt and the 10th will also probably be the day on which the new Cabinet puts the final touches to the Queen's Speech. But, at official level, it seems to be thought desirable that the new Prime Minister should avail of the Taoiseach's presence for a brief contact though discussions of substance would, of course, be a matter to be arranged for a later date. The desirability of this might be seen as less pressing if Mr Callaghan stops in No. 10. If Mrs Thatcher is in No. 10, she may, of course, be chary of any meeting, however brief, without the prior opportunity for full briefing and reflection.

Yours sincerely


Minister Plenipotentiary

Mr David Neligan
Assistant Secretary
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