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To: Secretary to the Government

From: W. Kirwan,
Assistant Secretary

Contacts with Northern Ireland parties other than the S.D.L.P.

1. You may wish to glance over the attached paper received by Mr. Murray from Mr. T. O'Connor of the Department of Finance. It contains some interesting material.

2. Picking up a reference in the paper, Mr. Murray's note of 22 September refers to criticism expressed at the recent British Irish Association Conference by Mr. John Cushnahan, the General Secretary of the Alliance Party. The criticism was of the political parties in the South on the basis that, as he saw it, they had made no serious attempts to engage in dialogue with Northern Ireland politicians. I would comment that this criticism is a bit "Irish", coming from the Alliance Party. The Leader of that party, Mr. Oliver Napier wrote to the Taoiseach's predecessor on 26th June, 1979 seeking a meeting to discuss security. The reply by Mr. Lynch, dated 3 August, 1979 after outlining some considerations relating to any discussion of security with an Alliance delegation, indicated that he and his colleagues would welcome and see considerable value in a meeting with the Alliance Party at which there could be a wide-ranging exchange of views on the Northern Ireland situation, covering political developments, economic co-operation and security policy in a general way, subject to the constraints previously mentioned by the then Taoiseach. He indicated that he had arranged that his colleagues, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and for Tourism and Transport would meet an Alliance delegation shortly thereafter for a discussion on the lines suggested. Mr. Napier replied on 28th August, 1979 (after the Mountbatten murders) again suggesting a meeting on the single theme of security. Mr. Lynch, in a further reply dated 27th September, 1979 maintained the line that in order to have the fullest possible value, any meeting would need to be on the wide-ranging basis he had previously suggested. He commented that this would facilitate discussion of all the closely related issues pertinent to the eradication of violence in Ireland. A further letter dated 19th October, 1979 from Mr. Napier welcomed the closer security co-operation between the British and Irish Governments, expressed his appreciation of the confidentiality of the security discussions and indicated that he, accordingly, wished to postpone the initial request for a meeting. In a conversation with Mr. S. O hUiginn of the Department of

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Foreign Affairs in October, 1979, Mr. Cushnahan himself, as reported, "volunteered ~~fearfully~~ that the Alliance Party had been out-manoeuvred by Mr. Lynch in respect of the suggested meeting.

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I believe that there would now be some advantage in inviting the Alliance Party to send a delegation to Dublin for talks with the Taoiseach and Ministers on the three dimensions being stressed by the Taoiseach. Such a meeting might help to induce Alliance to raise their sights and consider a way forward in a wider context than the purely Northern Ireland framework they have tended to stress up to now. Whatever about the views of Mr. Napier himself, some important figures within the Party may be receptive to some of the policy lines now being pursued by the Government. I have in mind Mr. David Cook, the Deputy Leader of the Party and former Mayor of Belfast and Mr. Cushnahan himself. In addition, such a meeting is likely to be noted favourably by the British Prime Minister and Ministers who will be considering what approach to adopt following the apparently inevitable collapse of the Atkins process.

4. I discussed the general question of contacts with Northern Ireland parties other than the S.D.L.P. with Mr. Martin Burke of the Department of Foreign Affairs who, as you know, maintains contacts in Northern Ireland. He told me that he intended to pay a visit to Northern Ireland after the forthcoming meeting between his Minister and Mr. Atkins, possibly for a somewhat more extended period than usual. He was in agreement as to the desirability of inviting the Alliance Party to have discussions with the Government here and indicated that he could informally assess the likely reaction to any such invitation in the course of his visit to the North. He was strongly of the view that little hope could be entertained that the Official Unionist or Democratic Unionist parties would be prepared to respond positively to any approach for discussions with the Government. The parties in the North are already in the run-up to the District Council elections due in May, 1981. While agreeing with Mr. Burke in his assessment, I suggested that no harm would be done if in the course of his contacts in the North he drew attention to the Taoiseach's comments that his door was always open to anyone anxious to have constructive discussions on the situation there and on ways in which to make political progress. Mr. Burke agreed that he could do this, if we secured political clearance.

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5. I think that Mr. Burke's contacts in the North are of such an informal nature that no harm, and possibly some good, would come from informal soundings of the type mentioned. If the Taoiseach agrees that such soundings should be made and also an assessment made of the likely Alliance reaction to any invitation, I will so inform Mr. Burke. I should add here that the last formal meeting between the Alliance Party and a member of the Irish Government was when Mr. Michael O'Kennedy, then Minister for Foreign Affairs met an Alliance delegation in Belfast on 17th May, 1978.

W. K. O'Connell

26th September, 1980.