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PS/Secretary of State (L)

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cc: PS/SofS (B) - M
PS/Ministers (L&B) - M
PS/PUS (L&B) - M
PS/Sir Ewart Bell - M
Mr Marshall
Mr Blelloch - M
Mr Wyatt - M
Mr Angel
Mr Oilliland - M
Mr Blatherwick - M
Mr Harrington
Miss Christopherson
Mr Waghorn
Mr Silvester
Mr Shepherd

WHITE PAPER: STATEMENT

I attach a clean draft of the Statement as agreed at the Secretary of State's meeting this morning.

N.C. Abbott

N C ABBOTT
5 April 1982

Mr Speaker I will, with permission, make a statement on political developments in Northern Ireland:

2. The Government has today published a White Paper setting out proposals for the election of an Assembly which would provide a framework within which a devolved government might again be set up in Northern Ireland. These proposals are designed to meet two objectives. First, to provide at once a means for greater democratic participation by the people of Northern Ireland in their own affairs. Secondly, to give them the opportunity to evolve for themselves a form of government acceptable to them.

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3. The Government proposes that there should be an election later this year to a new Northern Ireland Assembly. While consideration of the arrangements for a devolved administration will be its most crucial task, the Assembly will from its first day have important scrutinising, deliberative and consultative functions. It will be able to report on a wide range of topics and its reports will be laid before Parliament. The Assembly will normally have the opportunity to comment on draft Orders in Council and I am sure the House will wish to take careful account of those comments. The Assembly will establish Committees corresponding to each of the Northern Ireland Departments to monitor and report on their policies and activities. The composition of each Committee and the allocation of Chairmanships and Deputy Chairmanships will reflect, as far as practicable, the overall party representation in the Assembly.

4. The Assembly will from the outset be empowered to recommend arrangements under which the whole or part of the full range of legislative and executive responsibilities which were devolved in 1973, could be exercised by the Assembly and by a devolved administration answerable to it. If the Assembly send to the Secretary of State proposals which have the support of 70% of the total membership of the Assembly he will be required under statute to lay those proposals before Parliament for its consideration. He would also have discretion to present to Parliament proposals which did not command 70% support but which in his view enjoyed the support of both sides of the community in Northern Ireland. I would like to make two things clear: first, the parties in Northern Ireland will have wide discretion about the basis on which a devolved administration and Assembly might be formed and operate -

Her Majesty's Government is not seeking to impose any particular system; secondly, the Government would not recommend any arrangements to Parliament unless they believed them to be acceptable to both sides of the Northern Ireland community. Stable government can only come from such acceptability. If Parliament approves the Assembly's recommendations, powers would be devolved by Order in Council.

5. The Assembly will have the option of moving to full devolution of powers from the outset or, if it seems easier to achieve agreement on devolving the responsibilities of only some Northern Ireland Departments, to make proposals for partial devolution. In reaching the agreement on which its proposals are based, the Assembly will be able to consider appointments to head the Northern Ireland Departments and how executive powers should be exercised. In making executive appointments

the Secretary of State will be guided by the agreement which led to devolution.

6. The arrangements will be flexible in that partial devolution could lead on to further or full devolution. And if the agreement on which devolution was based collapsed and could not be re-established, it would be possible for the Assembly to revert to its scrutinising, consultative and deliberative functions, with the Secretary of State taking back other responsibilities.

7. Direct rule has served Northern Ireland well. It was, however, introduced as a temporary arrangement. It does not provide satisfactory political structures through which a divided community in Northern Ireland can make the necessary mutual accommodations to tackle its special problems. For Northern Ireland requires new political arrangements

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suiting to its unique character. These must reflect the history of the Province and its long experience of devolved government and must recognise and respect the differences of identity and aspiration which exist there. The proposals in the White Paper take account of these circumstances. At the same time they are firmly based upon Northern Ireland's position as a constituent part of the United Kingdom for so long as that is the wish of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Government is convinced that good relations with the Republic of Ireland are of great importance. These relations are for the sovereign governments and Parliament. It is for the London and Dublin Parliaments to consider whether the governmental meetings of the Anglo-Irish Intergovernmental Council should be complemented by an Anglo-Irish body at Parliamentary level in which members of

an elected Assembly in Northern Ireland could take part. In addition it would remain open to a devolved administration in Northern Ireland to make such bilateral arrangements and agreements with the Government of the Republic as it wished concerning the matters for which it is responsible.

The problems of Northern Ireland are formidable. The evil of terrorism has struck at the lives and expectations of ordinary people, Catholic and Protestant alike, for far too long. The economic decline is more acute and more intractable than elsewhere in the United Kingdom. The Government believes that the defeat of terrorism, the recovery of the economy and the establishment of effective political institutions go together and support one another. An end to the political deadlock of recent years offers the best hope of a sustained improvement in the economy and

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In security. The proposals in the White Paper are fair and flexible. Like all proposals for Northern Ireland they involve risk and controversy. The Government in no way underestimates the magnitude of the task or the strains any proposals will have to bear. But they also offer an opportunity which, with time and patience and the continued commitment and goodwill of Parliament, may be exploited to the advantage and relief of all the people in Northern Ireland.